

# January 2009 Delegation Finds Positive Programs but Continuing Problems

*By Katherine Hoyt [Hoyt is National Co-Coordinator of the Nicaragua Network.]*

The Nicaragua Network sponsored a delegation to Nicaragua from January 10 to 18, 2009 on which Chuck Kaufman and I both were able to travel with a diverse group of members that included university professors, primary school teachers, students, a family physician, and a librarian. Our goal was to learn more about what two full years of Sandinista government has meant for Nicaragua. We found answers to some of our questions and found that we had only begun to learn the answers to others. We were confronted with statements from different sources that strongly contradicted each other. In some cases we were able to at least partially resolve those contradictions; in others we were not.

We had a number of meetings in Managua before traveling to Matagalpa to get a different perspective. We heard severe criticisms of government programs from some but found that in practice the criticized programs were making a difference, albeit with problems recognized by the people involved in implementing them.

We had meetings with two recognized experts on Nicaragua's political reality from two different perspectives from within "Sandinismo," William Grigsby, the head of the radio station "La Primerisima," and Silvio Prado, director of the Center for Study and Political Analysis.

Grigsby said that the strategy of the Sandinista Party (FSLN) for victory in 2006 had been to neutralize the Catholic Church by allying with Cardinal Miguel Obando (Grigsby did not mention the support for the criminalization of therapeutic abortion but that was mentioned by others) and neutralizing the oligarchy by saying that a Sandinista government would not reject the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

After the Sandinistas took office, one of the most important decisions that they made, Grigsby said, was to join the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA—an international cooperation organization based upon the idea of social, political, and economic integration). Along with other measures, this, Grigsby said, would break the neo-liberal free trade model. And things are beginning to change in Central America, he said, with Honduras joining ALBA and Costa Rica and Guatemala joining Petrocaribe (an alliance with Venezuela to purchase oil on conditions of preferential payment).

Grigsby said, "CAFTA is terrible but few people came out to protest it because the FSLN never mobilized people." He said that in 1997, the FSLN made a strategic decision to join the system and work out a pact with the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) which cost the Sandinistas greatly because it demobilized the popular movement. The FSLN switched from a party of mobilized militants at the grassroots to an electoral party. "If Daniel does not give the FSLN a chance to restructure," Grigsby said, he will find it difficult to win future elections. Grigsby said that he felt that Ortega and his wife and campaign manager Rosario Murillo recognized that. In the case of the recent municipal elections where fraud was alleged in Managua and other cities, Grigsby presented a complicated scenario which he said explained how the Sandinistas did legitimately win in Managua.

Our other overview meeting was with Silvio Prado, the director of the Center for Study and Political Analysis. Prado pointed out that when Daniel Ortega returned to the presidency he found a very different state from the one he had left in 1990—a decentralized one with many micro power centers, including autonomous mayors, the autonomous regions, municipal development councils, etc. and checks and balances in various forms. Ortega had not governed, Prado said, without a majority in the legislature, or with so many bureaucratic controls and accounting rules, to say nothing of a civil society that did not respond to directions from a vanguard party. Prado said that Ortega's first actions reflected a desire to take back control through the establishment of the Councils of Citizen Power throughout the country as an alternative power structure, and through talk of changing Nicaragua to a parliamentary system.



*Silvio Prado said that Daniel Ortega set up the Councils of Citizen Power as an alternative power structure.*

“In the case of good programs like Zero Hunger,” Prado said, “we can get no information.” “No one can talk without the permission of Rosario Murillo,” he stated and told the story of how Orlando Nuñez was scheduled to talk to a group of civil society organizations about the Zero Hunger Program which was based on the model he pioneered. One day before the meeting, Murillo prohibited him from speaking. Prado asked, “How does this unelected person have such authority?”

In answer to a question about the role of money from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and most particularly the notorious International Republican Institute in supporting some non-governmental organizations in Nicaragua, Prado said, “This needs to be debated.” He went on to say, “Show me where the U.S. has given money for these street demonstrations. More money has come from Europe to those organizations that have been questioned [by the government]. If they were financing politics, they should be accused and expelled. I’m not afraid of the NED. On January 20, I have a meeting with the NED about a program for formation of citizens, human rights, etc. I should be able to meet with them.” [For information about the IRI’s funding of Nicaraguan groups, visit <http://www.nicanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/delegation-report.pdf>.]

In an effort to learn more about critiques of the government from within Sandinismo, we had a meeting with the president of the Sandinista Renovation Movement, Enrique Saenz. Saenz began by saying that the MRS, like Sandino of 80 years ago, believes in constitutionalism, social justice, national self-determination, and socioeconomic modernization. He said that the Ortega government began two years ago with a good set of conditions, including relative (if fragile) economic stability, non-hostile relations with the rest of Central America, and international partners ready to help. He said that the U.S government, the private sector, the Church and many Nicaraguans who voted against Ortega all adopted a “wait and see” attitude. Venezuela promised major financial support.

But, Saenz said, after two years of Ortega the situation has deteriorated dramatically. The economy has slowed and more people are out of work. Fraudulent municipal elections were followed by the repression of protestors by paramilitary groups organized by the FSLN. Old political wounds have been opened and new wounds have been made. Traditional international aid donors from Europe have been turned into enemies. Saenz said that the main goal of the MRS now is to defend the remaining democratic spaces against what he alleged were “Ortega’s dictatorial plans.” In answer to a question, he said that the much criticized MRS support for many candidates of the Constitutional Liberal Party in the municipal elections was not a decision made lightly and that it was taken democratically by a vote of party members.

Saenz criticized the way government programs are being carried out. He said that Venezuela provides 70% of Nicaragua’s oil needs. The arrangement is that 50% is paid in cash and the rest over 20 years at 1% interest. But the whole operation is carried out by a private businesses run by Ortega’s closest

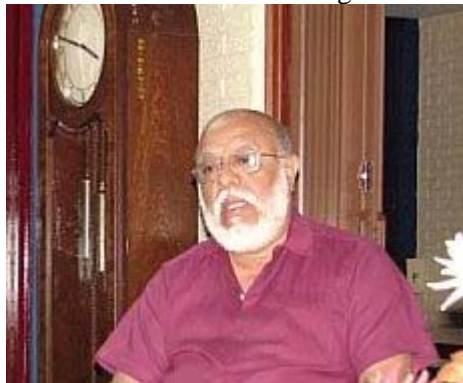
associates and is not subject to public scrutiny. Saenz also criticized the government's programs in the rural sector, saying that they were clientelist in that the benefits were given to those who supported the governing party and that the Zero Hunger Program was merely a "patch" that was not integrated into a total rural development program that included credit, technical assistance, infrastructure and markets.

We were scheduled to meet with four teachers, including a representative of the Sandinista teachers' union ANDEN, but only two of the teachers were able to come to the meeting and the ANDEN member was not among them. Silvia D. spoke of the excellent education under the Somoza government of the 1970s where she learned to read at five years of age attending a small private school. "For me the revolution was negative," she said, adding, "Sometimes governments try to change everything but it is better not to change everything at once."

Carolina A. said that she did not have the same opinion as her colleague about the revolution. But she believed that the decision to end the program of school autonomy was not a good one. Under the autonomy program, she said, the schools were maintained by funds from the government and contributions from families. "Our school was one of the best; very pretty!" she said. "Now there are not enough chairs, equipment or cleaning supplies," she stated. She noted that previously the schools only registered up to 40 students in each class. After that limit was reached, the registration was closed. However, she said, "this government said we had to register all the children." She ended up with 60 children in her class with no place to put them.

Silvia D. said that the government makes bad decisions such as the one to put another floor on her school. "With the second floor," she said, "we don't have enough yard for all of the children or enough drinking fountains." In answer to a question about parent involvement, she said that there was parent involvement under the school autonomy system but it was all abolished by the new government.

We also met with Miguel de Castilla, the Minister of Education, in his office in the Ministry. He told us that literacy was the biggest task that the new government had to confront in January 2007. Because under the neo-liberal governments parents had to pay to send their children to school, tens of thousands did not attend over a period of a decade and a half. As a result of this, illiteracy grew to 30% by 2007. The first thing the new government did upon taking office was to declare an end to school fees and work to lower the rate of illiteracy among those who had missed out on school during the previous years, de Castilla said. In 2007, more than 100,000 new students registered in the public schools, he said, adding that by 2012 he hoped that Nicaragua would meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of having almost all school age children in school. He said that the country's rate of illiteracy was down to 6% which he noted was the lowest in Nicaraguan history.



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De Castilla said that 17,000 parents and teachers were involved in a national consultation on a new curriculum. Teachers, he said, meet monthly at the local levels to plan and evaluate student progress. "We are seeing the first fruits of this," he said, with a retention rate of 94% for the 2008 school year [meaning that 94% of students who began the school year finished it]. He said that 1 million students receive a meal (breakfast or lunch) each day at school. The Ministry has a national plan for repair and construction of classrooms. However, he said that Nicaragua's teachers' salaries were "among the lowest in Latin America and a national embarrassment." He said that the government was able to raise salaries

by US\$25 per month in 2007, again in 2008, and expected to be able to match that raise again in 2009 with the goal of doubling the salaries in five years. He said, “We’ve opened the doors to teachers’ participation in all educational activities including policies so that they feel ownership of education and not just workers.”

When asked about school libraries, he said that they were very poor with old books. He said that they could benefit from donations of books in Spanish in science, social studies, literature, ESL, etc. and computers were needed as well. He noted that the new curriculum was a product of a national consultation so it fits Nicaraguan reality. “It’s modern,” he said, “and includes peace culture, gender equality, protection of the environment, and it is multicultural.” A program of “parent schools” is being expanded to more schools this year. In these schools, parents can learn the subjects they need to help their children with their homework. Parents can also work as assistants in the schools, he said.

Our group visited the Edgar Lang Health Center in Managua and met with the director Dr. Emelina Hernandez with whom we had met in July of 2007 with another delegation. She talked about the achievement of free health care and the on-going problems of shortages of medicines and materials that the clinic has to confront. She said that the clinic has been able to hire more doctors to handle the increase in the number of patients and has acquired a small ambulance to take patients from the clinic to the hospital in emergencies. They have been able to raise salaries by 12% to 15%. In the case of shortages of medicines, Hernandez said they are usually able to arrange an exchange with another clinic so that there are few patients who have to leave without their prescription filled.



*Dr. Emelina Hernandez (on right) talked about the achievement of free health care and the on-going problems of shortages of materials and medicines.*

Numbers of cases of dengue and diarrhea are down, she noted, saying with pride that not one person died of diarrhea last year. This, she said was the result of the work of the health brigades in the communities. She said that while fewer people participate in the volunteer brigades now than in the 1980s, the sector covered by her clinic with a population of 118,392, has a total of 370 *brigadistas*. She noted that the dengue mosquito doesn’t respect politics and many folks should see that their participation could help their communities. “This government makes mistakes,” she said, “but these sectors don’t see that illiteracy will soon be gone, that health care and schooling are free.... It’s like a white paper with certain black dots and for that they condemn the whole thing.”

Dr. Hernandez said that HIV-AIDS education, prevention, testing, and counseling are a priority and they carry out their AIDS work in coordination with other agencies including the Ministry of Education and the Pan American Health Organization. She said that there was a shortage of anti-retroviral medicine which in Managua is only distributed from the Manolo Morales and Berta Calderon Hospitals.

Maria Hamlin of the Center for Health Information and Consultancy Services (CISAS) spoke to us about the recent history of health services in Nicaragua. She spoke of the massive expansion of free health services under the Sandinista Revolution which, in spite of the training of popular health brigades and the establishment of health centers throughout the country, was plagued by a top-down mentality. After 1990, she said that health care became a capitalist enterprise with an end to free medicine and a proliferation of expensive pharmacies and private clinics. However, she noted that in the mid 1990s they were able to achieve the formation of a National Health Council.



“Now, where are we today?” she asked. “We have a government that says free health care but the private system is firmly established with no control over pharmacies, for example,” she said. She stated that the country still lives under the conditions of the World Bank and IMF so it is difficult to move forward. The National Health Council, which has members from the universities, the Red Cross, the churches, the Community Movement, and NGOs, has not met since Oct. 2007, she said. “We have demanded a meeting,” she said, “because we want to work with the government and, at the local level, we have been doing so.”

Hamlin said that the government has no national HIV-AIDS program in that all the funding comes from foreign donors. This was one of the moments when we appeared to be hearing two descriptions of government policy that were in direct contradiction to each other and subsequent questioning of Hamlin did not clear up our confusion. Our tentative conclusion was that, for some people, a program carried out by government employees but supported by funds from abroad is not a national program.

In an effort to learn what the impact of Nicaragua’s membership in the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) has been, we visited Nicaraocoop and met with Moises Lopez. He described Nicaraocoop as an organization of cooperatives and NGOs working to benefit the poor people of Nicaragua. He began his presentation with an overview of the world food crisis noting that food prices have doubled recently and more than half of Nicaragua’s people spend 80% of their family’s income on food. He said that when small farmers are not included in the food chain, changes do not benefit poor families.



*Moises Lopez of Nicaraocoop said his organization receives funds under the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA).*

Lopez told us that Nicaraocoop was composed of four unions of cooperatives that in turn included 41 cooperatives with 3,200 members. He said that one of the ways Nicaraocoop was able to benefit its members was to charge 5% annual interest on loans for production rather than the 28% interest charged by other financial institutions. “How are we able to do this?” he asked. “Under ALBA with loans from the National Bank of Economic and Social Development of Venezuela (BANDES). We are one of ten organizations to receive this type of funding, he said; others include DelCampo in Leon, CECOCAFEN coffee cooperatives, the Association of Farm Workers (ATC), and a cheese cooperative.

Lopez said that Nicaraocoop is encouraging farmers to convert to organic agriculture even though the change is difficult “because it is more expensive and our goal is to feed more poor people.” He said that they had adopted from Venezuela the concept of barrio shops delivering beans and rice to 27 posts in Managua and other towns. Member coops also produce honey for sale to Europe and beans for sale to Venezuela, to FMLN-run cities in El Salvador and to the U.N. World Food Program [which now—in spite of opposition from U.S. agribusiness—uses donor country monies to purchase food within recipient countries wherever possible]. Lopez said that they now have a factory in Posoltega which produces sacks for use by farmers, employing 40 young people.

Lopez explained how the money from Venezuelan oil is routed to benefit Nicaragua’s poor. The oil comes to the mixed company Albanisa which is 60% Venezuelan and 40% Nicaraguan. Nicaragua pays 60% up front and 40% is financed with a loan to be repaid over 25 years at 2% interest. The profit from

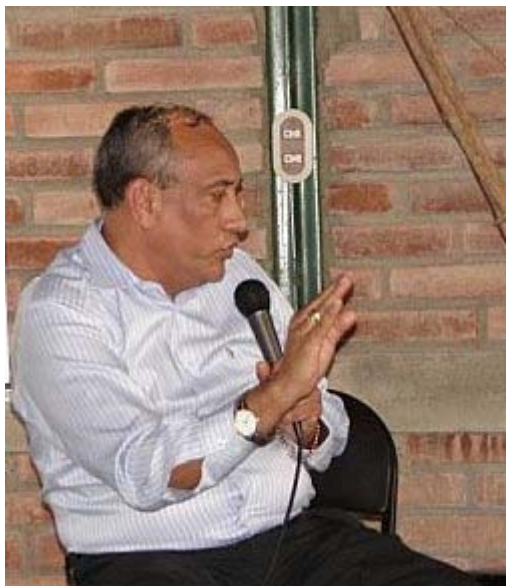
the sale of that 40% of Venezuelan oil goes into a fund for social needs. Some goes to the Alba Fund for Rural Credit (Albacaruna), some goes to the Zero Hunger and Zero Usury programs, and some goes to the Project Love program to address the problem of working children. Lopez said that Nicaracoop has benefited from ALBA funds which have helped provide access to markets for many small farmers.

His concerns centered around the fact that petroleum prices had fallen dramatically and Venezuela may not be able to maintain the same level of assistance to the member nations of ALBA. But he said that ALBA had brought about an ideological change toward fair trade and fair prices, toward solidarity and complementarity. While people like Orlando Nuñez maintain the ALBA path is the way to equitable development, others say that it is utopian and unrealistic. Lopez said that neo-liberal ideas have influenced many on the left. He said that there have also been some people who have thought of ALBA as just another opportunity to make money and have power. He mentioned the case of Venezuelan urea, a petroleum-based fertilizer which can be sold for a good profit for those agencies and individuals involved while conflicting with the push of organizations like his toward organics. When asked whether small farmers and cooperatives were considered by the government to be its best allies, he answered that there were some in the government that had doubts. And he expressed concern about the lack of information available to the public about just what ALBA is accomplishing in the area of small scale agriculture.

Members of the delegation purchased fair trade coffee, honey, jam, wine, chocolate, nuts and other products at the Nicaracoop store in the first of many fair trade shopping opportunities!

For a different perspective on the ALBA, we met with economist Cirilo Otero, president of the Center for Research on Environmental Policy. Otero said that the positive aspect of ALBA is that it seeks the development of the internal capacities of each country but, he noted, the countries that have joined are the less developed ones, not just in the economic sense, but in education and in other areas as well. He noted that of all the member countries, including Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Dominica and Honduras, only Venezuela is rich and the one that has the money has more voice. Most of ALBA is humanitarian, not transformational, Otero said, adding that there is little investment for transformational change. Besides, he maintained, true transformation will have to come out of the civil society of the developed world, not from the smaller countries that have limited voice in the IMF and World Bank where the capitalist system has been enforced.

Nicaragua needs to intelligently develop its capacities and its comparative advantage, according to Otero. We could sell carbon rights, he said, given that we have more forests than Costa Rica and that country sold US\$170 million in 2007 to polluters from the developed world. Venezuela wants to buy 700 steers from us twice a year, he said, which would make the ranchers happy but would be bad for the environment.



*Otero said that Nicaraguans needed to know the level of Venezuelan aid and exactly how it is being used.*

Otero insisted, in a reference to the presidents of both Venezuela and Nicaragua, that change can be brought about with more serenity and hard figures and less rhetoric. “We can talk to the capitalists,” he said, adding that Nicaragua needs rich and powerful partners and that more time is needed to effect change that can only come through education. “There are times when you have to throw the shoe,” he said, but “people write Hugo Chavez off as crazy.”

He noted that in official Venezuelan publications, Nicaragua appears as a creditor of Venezuela even though the Nicaraguan government says that the debt to Venezuela is not a public debt. Otero said that Nicaraguans needed to know the level of Venezuelan aid and exactly how it is being used. “I see in ALBA with relation to Nicaragua more words than actions,” Otero said, noting that the giant refinery Chavez promised will probably not be built and that Daniel Ortega offended international donors based on a promise that Venezuela would fill any budgetary holes, a promise that Chavez may not be able to fulfill.

After several days of meetings in Managua, we traveled to Matagalpa to learn about rural and community programs and some of the issues confronting non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including women’s organizations.

Alejandro Reyes of the Ministry of Agriculture explained to us that Zero Hunger is a program which has as its goal helping Nicaragua achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals of poverty reduction by providing rural women with a “production package” of animals and seeds, materials, technical training and a savings program. Reyes said that 32,000 women and their families have benefited from the program so far. He said that all animals and materials are provided in the name of the woman to ensure that benefits will go to all the members in the family especially the children. Women who have access to at least 2.5 acres of land can receive a pregnant cow, a pig, and chickens. He said that boards are formed in all the communities served and participants are trained. The women in Matagalpa have saved almost US\$14,000. The women in each community decide how they will use the money saved. For each cordoba saved, the women can borrow two cordobas.



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Reyes said that there have been some problems. About 300 cows died last year because they were given to families in zones that were not appropriate for cows. So, he said, in some areas they are providing goats or wool-less sheep called pelibueyes instead of cows. The animals are purchased from private farmers, Reyes said, adding, “We have revitalized the agriculture sector.” He said that the Zero Hunger Program has purchased 100,000 chickens as well as thousands of cows and pigs.

At the beginning, Reyes explained, Zero Hunger was going to be run through the NGOs; however, later it was decided that it should be a government program through the Agriculture Ministry because of the size of the project. “But many organizations participate,” he said, “including UNAG [the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers] of which I am a Matagalpa board member.” Beneficiaries, he said, fill out an application form and are chosen by the Councils of Citizen Power in the communities and then at the municipal level based on certain criteria. They have to be poor, have access to between 2.5 and 7 acres of land, and have access to water. The Agriculture Ministry checks to make sure that each woman chosen has the conditions to participate in the program. Reyes said that the hope is to soon be able to benefit everyone in a given poor rural community in order to overcome charges of favoritism. The women who

have received the production packages this year will proceed to a higher level of organization in the coming year and will be forming cooperatives.

Reyes explained that the value of the production package is approximately US\$1,500 plus US\$500 worth of technical assistance. Funds for the program are coming from national monies and also from outside donors, including Taiwan, Venezuela, and the Inter-American Development Bank. Urban dwellers and those with less than 2.5 acres of land were pressuring for a special program, he said, and now they have a mini-package that does not include the larger animals. In total, including those getting the full production package and the mini-package, they hope to include 100,000 women in five years, Reyes stated. In answer to the charge that the families will sell the cow at the first family emergency, Reyes said that each cow is branded with the program's brand and does not belong to the family until the first calf is born and the family has saved 20% of the value of the production package.

We next traveled with the agricultural extension workers of the town of San Ramon to visit the small farms of two women who have benefited from the program. Pilar V., a widow, said that she and her sons planted corn, beans, yucca, taro root, and bananas. She said that from the training she has received, she has learned to care for her animals which, she said, have not gotten sick. The agriculture workers visit her, she said, and she goes to meetings also. She said that in August she received her cow, which was about to give birth at the time of our visit, and then on December 23, the pig. This is the first time her family has had farm animals.



*Pilar V. (in pink), a participant in Zero Hunger, plants corn, beans, taro root and bananas.*

Maria Isabel B., whom we next visited, is an indigenous woman whose land is part of the traditional indigenous land holdings in the Department of Matagalpa. She has use and fruit of the land which a non-indigenous person would have to lease. Her production package included a cow, chickens, and several pelibuey sheep. Besides corn and beans, she and her children grow oranges, avocados, papaya, and yucca. When asked if she sells the fruit she produces at the local market, she said that no, they eat it along with the six eggs that they get each day from the hens. When asked about the accusation that the Zero Hunger Program was only for Sandinistas, Maria Isabel laughed and said that she had been a Liberal for many years but never got so much as a pinch of salt from them so she and her children all switched in 2006 and voted for "Don Daniel Ortega."

The agricultural extension workers told us about their work and how they got their jobs. They had completed degrees in agricultural engineering but were unemployed or under employed until the Zero Hunger Program hired them to do what they all agreed was very satisfying work. The program tries to achieve gender equity hiring half men and half women. Besides the degree in agriculture, experience in the countryside is valued and natives of the area where they would be working are given preference. The workers said that they didn't have to be Sandinistas. "We see improvement," one of the workers told us, "in that the people are not eating just corn and beans but cheese and eggs and they have elevated self esteem; I feel elevated as well!"

We next met with Cesar Tercero of the Association for the Diversification and Development of Communal Agriculture (ADDAC). Tercero told us about the philosophy and work of his organization and, in answer to questions about government programs in general and Zero Hunger in particular, he said that his organization had always worked apart from the government because governments give a high



partisan content to what they do. That implies, he said, that you do party work. He said that all of the work of ADDAC includes changing consciousness and that he didn't think that the government was doing that. Zero Hunger is good in its fundamental intentions, he said, but five years [of the presidential term] is a short period for a real transformation. That is the real weakness of the program, he explained. "[Orlando] Nuñez knows that," he said, but the political call has been strong and the government only has so much time."

We also met with Santiago Dolmus of CECOCAFEN, an association of coffee cooperatives. Dolmus said that he thought that the bill for the social problems of many years was being passed to this government and that many of the protests were enlarged by the media. It is true, he said, that the responsibility to change the situation of poverty is in the hands of the government but "we shouldn't demand that they make changes in two years and we shouldn't increase the government's problems as they respond to needs." He went on, "We're trying to contribute because there is an opportunity now to create something better for the poor."

To learn about the Councils of Citizen Power (CPC) and whether they are an innovative mechanism for participatory democracy (as their supporters say) or a partisan move to weaken democratic institutions, we met first with representatives of the Association for Integral Community Development (ADIC) and then visited a community center in a Matagalpa barrio to meet with neighborhood residents, some of whom were activists in the local CPC. ADIC leaders told us that their organization was founded in 1991 in a community with poverty and scarce services to mobilize citizens to defend their rights and take their demands to local and national governments. The group is an active member, we were told, of the Municipal Development Committee which was set up in Matagalpa by Sandinista mayor Sadrach Zeledon in his first term and has worked well. ADIC leaders thought that the Municipal Committee would continue to play its role of linking the local government with the community when the Sandinistas came into office at the national level but they were told that municipal officials would be working through the CPCs. ADIC's concern was that since there was a working body already in place that was pluralistic, why construct another? "We really worked with Sadrach," Blanca said, "and now that work was discounted completely. Why not strengthen what already exists? I'm not saying that the government is not doing anything good because it is, but we have this concern!" ADIC leaders were particularly concerned, also, by the Sandinista government's attacks on the women's movement, including Grupo Venancia in Matagalpa. (See below.)

At the Pancasan neighborhood community center, a large group of local citizens told us about their community's efforts to improve their neighborhood with the support of ADIC. Ricardo, a long time neighborhood activist who is now a member of the neighborhood CPC, told us about their continuing work with ADIC and with government programs such as Zero Usury, which provides small loans to micro businesses. Two women, mother and daughter, both named Sandra, who have worked through the years with ADIC and now are members of the CPC, said that the CPC and the Blanca Arauz Women's Association are working on a much needed sewer project which they see as similar to the improvement projects of ADIC. There was general agreement that the Communal House was the most important factor favoring community organizing. Sandra, Jr., said that people are more willing to come to a meeting of the CPC at the Communal House than at a private home. People come, she said, and bring their requests; "best in writing—we've learned this from ADIC," she added. "We've gotten several streets paved," she stated.

Anabel, however, wanted to make clear that the Communal House and the CPCs were two different things and that the CPCs had to get permission each time to use the House. "They are two separate entities," she insisted, "although we're all working for the welfare of the community." Sandra, Sr., responded saying that no one group has the unique right to the Communal House. The CPCs, she explained, were founded to carry messages to the government and as a way to organize people. Sandra, Jr., added, "We're free to choose if we want to join the CPC or not. But I think that the government should use more than just the CPCs to communicate with us. They should use forums and other ways and keep nothing hidden."

In a further effort to learn about the criticisms of the Ortega government from the left, we met with leaders of Grupo Venancia, a Matagalpa women's cultural organization. The meeting began with a pleasant surprise for this writer as the Venancia leaders remembered a presentation a few years ago by my daughter Victoria Gonzalez, a historian, on first wave feminism (e.g. the struggle for suffrage) in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Nicaragua. They said it was important because some recent governments have claimed that feminism in Nicaragua came from outside and only appeared in the last few years.

Luisa Perez told us about Venancia programs which include educating women about their rights, weekly cultural programs in music, dance and theater, and a weekly radio program that has been on the waves for eight years. Venancia also works with families who were affected by the war of the 1980s and with the Women's Police Stations of the National Police. "We work to advance our feminism by strengthening other women's groups so most of our work is in networks!" Perez said. Campaigns have been waged on economic rights, political rights, reproductive rights, gay and lesbian rights, for the right to therapeutic abortion, to stop violence against women and others.



*Luisa Perez (on left) told us that Grupo Venancia was being harassed by the Ortega government.*

Perez stated that her organization is among the women's groups being persecuted by the Ortega government. She said that the government won't accept criticism from any side. "We are all on the left but they say we are on the right," Perez said. She added, "This is very offensive to us. It seems more like they are on the right." Last year, she continued, Grupo Venancia was one of several groups accused of being on the right, collaborating with the United States and money laundering. "They asked us and CINCO [the Center for Communications Research] and MAM [the Autonomous Women's Movement] to hand over our financial documents," she said. "After discussion and legal advice, we turned over documents over to show the legality of our work," she added, saying "We're still waiting for an answer but we were strengthened by the whole episode." [Since our delegation all charges against CINCO and the women's organizations have been dropped for lack of evidence.]

Perez said, "We're not opposed to the anti-poverty programs but not everyone is benefitting, only the CPCs and the Sandinistas." She said that Grupo Venancia believed that Ortega's long term objective was to stay in power and consolidate a docile opposition in order to change the constitution to allow his reelection. But she exclaimed, human rights are not negotiable. She added "They are playing with the poor. Women don't know what to do. Should they collaborate and stop speaking out just to get a pig?"

With relation to health care, Perez was less critical. She said that health care has improved. After 1990, things got worse and worse until people simply preferred to stay at home and die. Now, she explained, things are better: there are reactives to do laboratory tests and free x-rays. In answer to a question about acceptance of gays and lesbians by the government and by society, Perez said that there has been much discussion about the contradictions in the new criminal code (passed in September 2007). The previous one criminalized homosexual relations but the new code does not. In fact, there is an article confirming sexual freedom and freedom from sexual aggression, Perez noted. However, the right women had for many decades to a therapeutic abortion was removed and this Grupo Venancia has worked to rescind and this is one reason for government harassment.



*The delegation group did our summary and evaluation after a fish lunch on one of the Isletas in Lake Nicaragua.*

The delegation had the opportunity to travel by boat from Granada to one of the islands of the famous “Isletas” for lunch and for time to do a review of what we had seen. Some of the early conclusions of the delegation were:

- 1) Based on our very small sample of visits, the government’s anti-poverty programs were making a difference but it was necessary to travel outside the capital to see and feel that difference. Zero Hunger may not be a national development plan but it is a policy to bring an important sector of the population out of deep poverty.
- 2) At all levels, we found that people were not happy with the amount of information that they were receiving about what the government was doing (some of it very good!)
- 3) On the question of the policies of free education and health care, we found mostly praise although there was concern that the problems of class size could substantially affect the quality of education that children were receiving.
- 4) ALBA was seen as a positive proposal of an alternative model to that of neo-liberal free trade, but some people wanted more information about the different projects that ALBA funds were supporting (such as Nicaraocoop) and some were concerned that the ALBA debt could become a national debt. There was a serious concern that programs could lose funding from Venezuela if the price of oil continues to drop.
- 5) In Managua, the CPCs were seen by some of the people we met with as only including Sandinistas. In Matagalpa, the CPCs were seen as just another community organization working in cooperation with many others; the main concern was that they were replacing the long fought for Municipal Development Committees.
- 6) The polarization that we found was disheartening, but we found less polarization once we left Managua. We were disappointed that, during our last days in Nicaragua, convicted felon and former president Arnoldo Aleman was absolved of the crime of stealing US\$100 million from the Nicaraguan state in a political deal to end the paralysis of the National Assembly.