

ENCA



Environmental Network *for* Central America

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Central America Elections

Round up of political action from across the region

The Narco Effect

Examining the links between deforestation & drug trafficking

Urban Agriculture

The rise of a food movement in Nicaragua



Opening Pandora's Box



ENCA aims to work directly with people in communities who are seeking to arrest environmental degradation and who are often struggling against the repression and violence of armies and police forces acting under the command of wealthy individuals, transnational corporations and corrupt politicians. We campaign with them to place environmental rights within national constitutions and to ensure that all natural resources are made to benefit the many and not the few.

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Oil Barrels in Nicaragua
lbtime.com [creative commons]

Central American Elections Round-up

Doug Specht reports on ENCA's election observation to El Salvador and the region's other elections and political wranglings

Since November three Central American Countries have held their presidential elections. Each was met with its own issues and problems, although it is not all doom and gloom. Five ENCA members were also able to help aid the process of delivering free, fair and transparent elections in the region by working with the Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (CIS) in El Salvador to observe the build-up and process for the first round of elections there. Although the electoral process is not a focus of ENCA's, the results in some of the recent elections have wide reaching and potentially devastating effects on the environment in the region. For that reason we felt it pertinent not only to attend the Salvadoran elections, but also to provide a summary of each of the most recent elections detailing the links this may have to the environmental policies of each country.

El Salvador

ENCA was represented at the CIS by an eclectic mix of persons, while all ENCA members and supporters each brought their own knowledge and experience to the delegation. Martin Mowforth, editor of the ENCA newsletter, author of 'The Violence of Development' and lecturer at Plymouth University was joined by Doug, co-editor of ENCA, and managing director of VOZ, Helen Yuill from the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, John Drewery from the TUC and Neville Lowden from Quinta Amanecer in Nicaragua.

As part of the CIS delegation the team were given training in the electoral process of El Salvador, a process which appeared to be better managed and

more transparent than we had observed in previous years. Come election day the team was well versed in the kind of irregularities to look for, and along with the other 90 CIS delegates were deployed across the country to key polling stations.

The vote on the 2nd February was seen as being fair and transparent, and the ENCA team observed a generally pleasant and party-like atmosphere at most polling stations. Neighbourhood voting had worked to reduce queues and increase accessibility. Few major irregularities were noted at polling stations, although a number of incidents of vote buying were reported. Results appear to have been transmitted in a transparent and fair way, despite one count reportedly being doctored. Real problems lay in absentee voting, a confusing system and lack of precedent meant that many overseas votes were never cast or counted.

Although this round was clean and fair, it failed to yield a winner, and run-off elections occurred on 9th March. These were more tense, and at times reminiscent of earlier elections. In an incredibly close contest the FMLN won with a majority of just over 6500 votes, causing ARENA to cry fowl and threaten the use of the military to 'enforce democracy'. After a recount by the TSE, taking several days, during which time rhetoric between the two parties became increasingly aggressive, it was announced that the FMLN were indeed the winners, and that Sánchez will assume the presidency. The closeness of the win may cause the FMLN problems through this term, in which they have promised to uphold the ban on metal mining in El Salvador.



Honduras

Much has been written about the Honduran elections which took place in November 2013, shortly after the last ENCA newsletter. Here we offer a quick summary of some of the key points and concerns over what was clearly an illegitimate and rigged election.

A culture of fear and aggression has become commonplace in Honduras, and the neoliberal government has worked to tighten its grip on the nation since the 2009 coup. This reached fever pitch as the 2013 elections approached, with troops deployed on the streets and at broadcast stations, ready to remove opposition voices from the debate. Intimidation was stepped up and members of the Libre party - whose candidate was the wife of ousted President Zelaya - were routinely harassed, threatened and arrested on unsubstantiated charges.

In the week leading up to the polling day thousands of international observers descended on the country. Reports of electoral irregularities quickly emerged with "serious signs of trafficking in [election worker] credentials and other irregularities" in addition to a "clear imbalance in the visibility of different [political] parties in the media" and "a lack of transparency in electoral campaign financing," according to the EU-EOM.

This pre-election fraud was nothing compared to that on election day, as the National Party claimed a victory before results were announced by the TSE. The USA, Spain, Colombia, Panama and UK were quick to congratulate Hernández on his win even as the TSE called for more time to finish the vote counting.

Despite the large numbers of fraudulent votes and inconsistencies in the count Hernández was inaugurated in February. The struggle against the installed government and its neoliberal US-backed politics continues within the same climate of fear that has become the norm in what is now the deadliest country in the world to be a journalist, lawyer or activist.



ENCA Members Martin Mowforth, John Drewery, Helen Yuill, Neville Lowden and Doug Specht at the CIS post-election press conference in El Salvador

Costa Rica

Elections in Costa Rica took place on 2nd February, and as in El Salvador no party was able to gain the required percentage points (40% in this case) to gain power. Costa Rica is yet to hold its run-off elections which are due to take place on 6th April 2014.

Despite this lack of outcome, the run-up to the election is of great interest. With the incumbent government facing multiple charges of corruption, 10 new parties, representing both the right and the left emerged and were placed on the ballot. This further break from the two party state under which the country has operated since the 1950s is an indication of the concerns the population has over the increasing neoliberalisation of the country.

Protests against CAFTA and the pillaging of the country by big oil and mining have been given a new political face. Three major leftist parties were represented in February: *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (PAC) who splintered from *Liberación Nacional* and previously did well in their 2006 campaign; *Partido de los Trabajadores* (PT), founded in 2012 of a Trotskyist orientation that has kept alive the challenge to the nature of the corporate state; and Frente Amplio, who after two previously poor campaigns was favourite, campaigning on a policy of resistance to neoliberalism. The complexity of the movement that wants to stop continuity of neoliberalism in

government has as much to do with political paradigms about power and movement building in electoral processes, as it has to do with strategies about resisting neoliberalism in creating deep social change. There is hope in *Frente Amplio* because it has grown as a result of society saying 'enough' and it is building autonomous organisations that could possibly change the course of history in Costa Rica.

Upcoming Elections

2014 is set to be an interesting year politically in Central America. Panama's elections loom in May, with concerns over contracts and unpaid debts connected to the Panama Canal, and Ortega's El Gran Canal plans at the centre of political wranglings. The stage has been set for a potentially fraught and aggressive campaign.

Useful Websites

Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad
<http://www.cis-elsalvador.org/>

VOZ
<http://www.1voz.org>

Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign
<http://www.nicaraguasc.org.uk/>

Quinta Amanecer
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Quinta-Amanecer/205403469644924>



Opening Pandora's Box?

As Nicaragua sells its newly acquired ocean territories for foreign oil exploration *Tim Volkmann* examines the destructive effects of oil and gas exploration across Central America.

Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua are part of the 'Mesoamerican Biological Corridor', which was created to protect endangered species in Central America, connecting the landscapes and ecosystems from Mexico to North-Colombia. However exploitation of all kinds, from deforesting, industrial farming, mining, oil and gas exploration are endangering this natural habitat.

Despite marketable quantities of oil and gas not having been discovered in Central America, Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua have experienced increased interest in onshore and offshore oil and gas exploration from international companies in recent years.

One of the first countries to grant permits for oil and gas exploration was Belize. The licenses issued include operations in indigenous lands, violating international human rights as well as endangering the local ecosystem. Greg Ch'oc, executive director of SATIIM (Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management) commented: "Outside money has more power than local governance. A wealthy foreign corporation can set off dynamite and extract oil without an environmental impact assessment or a mitigation plan." Heavy protest arose as Belize granted the first offshore exploration licenses in the Meso American Reef, the second largest in the world, in 2004 and 2007. Princess Petroleum was granted the right to oil drilling over the 'Blue Hole', a UNESCO World Heritage Site made famous by ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau. But

protests and campaigns, organised by Oceana, COLA (Citizens Organised for Liberty through Action) and the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage have led to success. In 2011 the coalition launched a national petition, collecting over 20,000 votes, leading to a referendum with 96 per cent voting against offshore oil explorations on Belize's coastline. Finally, in January 2013 the Supreme Court of Belize declared the issued contracts illegitimate, emphasising that Belize's government failed to properly assess the environmental risks involved with offshore oil drilling. Further, the company did not demonstrate proven expertise for environmentally safe operations. Audrey Matura-Shepherd, vice president of Oceana in Belize declared, "This is a great day for the people and country of Belize and its democratic process and it shows that we, as ordinary citizens, need not sit back and only complain about all the wrong decisions our Government makes."

“Outside money has more power than local governance”

Greg Ch'oc

Unfortunately, Honduras does not share Belize's success. The BG Group, a subsidiary of British Gas, started its negotiations in 2012 for offshore oil drilling along the Honduran coast. A BG Group spokesman commented "We believe that Honduras offers considerable potential of reserves and

felt that the offshore region had been largely overlooked by our competitors."

While Honduras suffers from the ongoing US-led drug wars and its population lives in constant fear of death squads and military raids, local organisations such as the COFADEH (Committee of the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared) warn that an international oil giant would only worsen the situation. Indeed BG Group negotiated with the Honduran army and navy about security arrangements as, according to BG Group, it is concerned about working in the world's most violent country and the third most corrupt in the Americas. Bertha Oliva, director of COFADEH, said that military and private security working for big companies are criminalising and targeting local politicians, social movements and peasant communities to prevent land reforms and secure their interests disguised as anti-drug operations.

BG Group signed the oil exploration contract for an area of 34,965 sq km in 2013 and started its operation in January 2014. Simultaneously Chevron, the US oil giant, also indicated interest in offshore explorations in Honduras.

These recent and alarming developments in Honduras mirror those taking place in Nicaragua, where the US-based Noble Energy started their offshore oil and gas exploration in late 2013. They are drilling two wells in the Caribbean, launching Nicaragua's first oil exploration with an investment

of \$30 million and a prospective yield of 500 million barrels in 20 to 30 years.

The exploration area was granted to Nicaragua by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in November 2012 after a long-lasting dispute with Colombia and Costa Rica. "We have allocated blocks for exploration in the search for oil and gas in the territories as defined by the court," said Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega who backs Noble's operations and might be one of the main beneficiaries of the estimated \$700 million revenues per year if the drilling is successful. In total Nicaragua is planning to allocate 68,500 square kilometres, divided into 150 blocks, for offshore explorations. Campaigners warn that a significant number of offered blocks are part of the UNESCO-sanctioned biosphere 'Seaflower', endangering the reef's fragile ecosystem.

Sources:

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<http://worldwatch.org/node/4807>
<http://ens-newswire.com/2013/04/18/belize-court-protects-barrier-reef-from-unsafe-oil-drilling/>
<http://belizecoalition.wordpress.com/>
<http://www.spinwatch.org/index.php/issues/climate/item/5598-british-gas-risks-fueling-dirty-war-in-killing-fields-of-honduras>
http://www.centralamericadata.com/en/search?q1=content_en_le:%22oil+exploration%22&q2=matersInCountry_es_le:%22Honduras%22
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-23721914>
<http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/South-America/Exploring-for-Oil-in-Nicaragua-Friends-in-High-Places.html>

Inside this newsletter you will have found a flyer for

The Violence of Development by ENCA member Martin Mowforth.

His book, about resource depletion in Central America draws upon much of ENCA's work and it is for this reason that we felt it was appropriate to include with this newsletter. The book is available now from Pluto Press.

Open letter to the President of the World Bank in defence of El Salvador

Earlier in the year ENCA signed on to an open letter to the World Bank denouncing their involvement in socially and environmentally degrading investments. We have reproduced a copy of that letter for our readers.

Dr. Jim Yong Kim, President
World Bank Group
1818, H Street NW
Washington, DC, 20433, USA

The signers of this petition are international and national civil society organisations. We are writing out of solidarity with the communities of El Salvador that have been working through the democratic process to prevent a proposed cyanide-leach gold mining project, over well-founded risks that it will poison the local communities' environment as well as the country's most important river and source of water.

Rather than complying with the environmental permitting process of El Salvador, the Canadian company Pacific Rim launched an attack under the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA). While that approach was rejected for lack of jurisdiction, Pacific Rim was still allowed to continue the arbitration based on an outdated investment law that has since been amended by the Salvadoran General Assembly. On that basis, the case remains before the World Bank's International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID).

Pacific Rim is demanding \$301 million US dollars in compensation from the government of El Salvador or to provide it with an operating permit in spite of the huge risks to the country's water supply.

Pacific Rim is using ICSID to subvert a

democratic nationwide debate over mining and environmental health in El Salvador. When it comes to such issues, local democratic institutions should prevail, not foreign corporations seeking to exploit natural resources.

These matters should not be decided by the World Bank's investor state arbitration tribunal or any other foreign tribunal. To make things worse, in the course of Pacific Rim's intervention in the political affairs of El Salvador, four anti-mining activists have been murdered in the project area.

We urge you to review the role of the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) and to determine if it supports the Bank's mission of ending poverty and promoting responsible and sustainable economic development.

We urge you to undertake this review through an open process with public hearings and the ability for mining affected communities and their allies to present evidence of the harm done by corporations using the investor - state arbitration process to undermine the public interest laws and regulatory structures in countries of the Global South.

We stand with the people of El Salvador in their demand that their domestic governance processes and national sovereignty be respected. The Pacific Rim ICSID arbitration is a direct assault against democratic governance. We stand on the side of democracy.

Sincerely,

CC Meg Kinnear, Secretary-General, ICSID
V.V. Veeder, Tribunal President
Brigitte Stern, Tribunal Member
Guido Santiago Tawil, Tribunal Member

Visiting ENCA's Partners

Following in the footsteps of ENCA's intrepid flightless traveller James Watson (see ENCA 57), another ENCA member, *Martin Mowforth*, recently visited a number of Central American groups which can be considered as ENCA's partner organisations – although he cannot claim that this was flightless. Space limits the narrative accounts of what these partner organisations are doing and how they are progressing with their aims; and so a very brief photo documentary is given in this edition of the newsletter .

Social and environmental movements in Central America have always been inspirational for many people within ENCA. We aim to work directly with people in communities who are seeking to arrest the environmental degradation and who are often struggling against the repression and violence of armies and police forces acting under the command of wealthy individuals, trans-national corporations and corrupt politicians. We campaign with them to place environmental rights within national constitutions and to ensure that all natural resources are made to benefit the many and not the few.

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COMUS (United Communities of Usulután, El Salvador)

Over the last couple of years, COMUS has contracted a number of local farmers in their region of influence to grow basic grains such as wheat for a World Food Programme (WFP) project which promotes local production of staple foods for local communities which have difficulty (because of scarce means) in purchasing their basic food requirements.

Bottom Left: This photograph shows their relatively new warehouse building for the storage and distribution of the WFP grains.

Below: COMUS activists: Juan Rodríguez, Estela Anzora (Presidente) and Jaime Coutts in Comus' main centre in the town of San Francisco Javier, Usulután.

The CMO (Womens' Council of the West [of Nicaragua])

Over the last year, ENCA has funded two projects run by the CMO to provide more efficient stoves on which to cook their tortillas. All the beneficiaries produce tortillas commercially, up to 300 per day.

All the women visited reported that the stoves were a great blessing for their commercial activities as the chimneys took the smoke away from the interiors of their houses, their health was much improved as a result, and their use of firewood was much reduced as a result of which their profits had increased.

Below: From left to right, the photo shows Bithia Santamaria, Danelia Rivera and María Nicomedes, all leading members of the CMO





IPES (Permaculture Institute of El Salvador)

Above: IPES worker Dinora raking over the boccache (compost mixed with animal dung). The animals kept on the IPES demonstration plot about 8 km outside the town of Suchitoto, provide the necessary manure to mix with other vegetative material. The mixture can be turned into extremely rich soil fertiliser within only two weeks if it is regularly turned.

Below: Lunchtime at the IPES demonstration plot for everyone on the training course. All lunch ingredients were grown on the plot itself. Not only 'no artificial ingredients', but also 'no imported ingredients'. Very impressive.



Clínica Xochilt, El Viejo, Nicaragua

In minor ways, ENCA has helped the development of the Xochilt Clinic in the town of El Viejo over the past few years. The clinic was originally formed to treat plantation workers and their families, especially those suffering from pesticide contamination. Over time it has evolved into a more general purpose clinic, but still concentrates on providing medical assistance to people who cannot afford medical care.

Below: The Clínica Xochilt team: from left to right: Edilberta Gómez (coordinator), Rosario Balmaceta (therapist), Felix Sánchez, Dr Manuel Millón, Dra Pastora Acevedo.



MUFRAS-32 (Francisco Sánchez United Movement – 1932)

A group of election observers (for the first round of the Salvadoran elections) visited the department of Cabañas where, before the elections, they met with members of MUFRAS-32. Hector Berríos (shown below in the MUFRAS-32 t-shirt – on the left) talked to us about the origins of the organisation and the struggle they lead against Pacific Rim, the Canadian mining company which is suing the government of El Salvador for cancelling its mining permits – see earlier ENCA Newsletters.





Cane workers' protests and chronic kidney disease

As cane workers' protest turns violent leaving one dead, several injured and the police under investigation, *Martin Mowforth* chronicles reports from Nicaragua News and La Isla Foundation.

An on-going protest of cane workers at the San Antonio sugar refinery in Chichigalpa, Department of Chinandega, turned violent on Saturday, Jan. 18, with a result of one protestor dead, several wounded and a number of people detained. Violence broke out after a promised meeting between the Pellas Group, owner of the refinery, and workers affected by chronic kidney disease, widely believed to be caused by working in the cane fields, failed to take place. Evidently the protestors took over the entrance to the refinery and, when police attempted to open passage to the plant, the protestors attacked them with homemade weapons. The police responded with live fire, fatally shooting Juan de Dios Torres, 47, and also wounding a 14 year old boy, José Valladares.

The National Police said in a communiqué that the members of the police patrol have been detained and are under investigation. Police spokesman Fernando Borge said that the National Police lamented the results of the police action and expressed to the family of the deceased their "consternation and decision to have justice done." Borge said that a team from the Directorate of Judicial Assistance (DAJ) and from the Office of Internal Affairs had been sent to Chinandega to investigate the incident.

La Isla Foundation reported that community members had protested at the San Antonio refinery for three weeks in December and January but had halted protests based on a promise from the

Pellas Group for a meeting on Jan. 18 to address their grievances. When that meeting failed to take place, the former cane workers and their supporters resumed their protest at the entrance to the plant. La Isla stated that chronic kidney disease has been responsible for 46% of all male deaths over the last ten years in Chichigalpa. The San Antonio refinery produces sugar, Flor de Caña rum, and biofuels for the national and international markets. (*El Nuevo Diario, Jan. 20; La Prensa, Jan 19; La Isla Foundation, Jan. 19; Informe Pastran, Jan. 20*).

Three weeks later Nicaragua News reported the findings of a World Health Organisation (WHO) investigation as follows.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than 24,000 people have died in Nicaragua and El Salvador from chronic kidney disease (CKD), a fivefold increase in the past twenty years. The disease affects principally workers in the sugar cane fields. In most countries the disease affects people over 70 years of age but, among cane worker, the disease hits the young. Many believe that the epidemic is caused by dehydration in the fields under the hot tropical sun. Others say that it could be that the workers chew on the cane and the combination of dehydration with cane juice would contribute to the disease. But Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of Baylor College of Medicine in Texas, says, "People have been sweating and getting dehydrated in the sugar cane

fields for hundreds of years, at least since the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. Why are we seeing these cases now?" One answer is agrochemicals. A 2012 CKD study in Sri Lanka found two toxic metals, cadmium from fertilisers and arsenic from pesticides, in the blood of farm workers in rice fields who suffered from kidney disease. WHO experts suggest that continuous exposure to these metals could explain the elevated levels of CKD in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Meanwhile, Ramón Vanegas, director of a dialysis centre in Managua, said that Nicaragua does not have the capacity to treat all the cases of chronic kidney disease in the country. Vanegas, who on Feb. 5 marked the first anniversary of his clinic, said that while "kidney disease occurs in all parts of the world, it occurs more in poor countries where the demand for dialysis is greater than the supply." He emphasized that the alternative is prevention. (*Radio La Primerísima, Feb. 8; El Nuevo Diario, Feb. 6*)

One week later, on 13th February, La Isla Foundation reported on the release of two new reports on CKD. Unfortunately space precludes us from including them here, but the reports can be found on the Foundation's website:

<http://laislafoundation.org/two-new-reports-ckd-epidemic-central-america/>



THE NARCO EFFECT: Drug trafficking and deforestation

Amy Haworth Johns takes a look at the complex relationship between the drugs trade and forest removal in Central America



Central American countries have always paid the price for the narcotics industry. With over US\$8bn of cocaine being transported between Colombia and North America in 2010*, the trafficking routes are characterised by death, money, corruption and deception. Using figures from a recent publication by the scientific journal *Nature*, BBC journalist Matt McGrath reveals that the forest is also paying the price.

When we think of the causes of deforestation, narcotics trafficking doesn't automatically spring to mind. In recent years, however, the crackdown on 'Drug Trafficking Organisations' (DTOs) has resulted in new routes being carved through remote areas of Honduras, Guatemala and Eastern Nicaragua.

These forested areas are already under tremendous strain. Since 2000 deforestation rates in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala have been amongst the highest in Latin America;

and in Honduras, the level of large-scale deforestation per year quadrupled between 2007 and 2011. The average 'deforestation baseline' of 20km² is a result of weak governance, high levels of poverty, climate change, illegal logging, industrial megaprojects and vast agricultural expansion. However, under the 'narco-effect', forest loss has increased to 60km² and higher. Figures 1 and 2 show a dramatic increase after 2007 that correlates with the increase in the number of 'primary cocaine movements'.

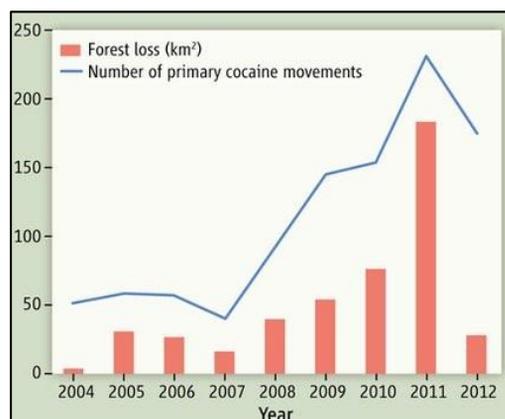
In his article, McGrath lays out 3 main ways by which DTOs have contributed to the diminishing forest:

- A boom in clandestine landing strips and roads, both of which require vast areas of forest to be cleared.
- The support and expansion of existing businesses that are already responsible for the loss of forest cover (ranches, timber traffickers,

oil palm growers and large-scale agribusinesses). A presence of DTOs results in an injection of cash and weapons that also fuels corruption between landowners and officials.

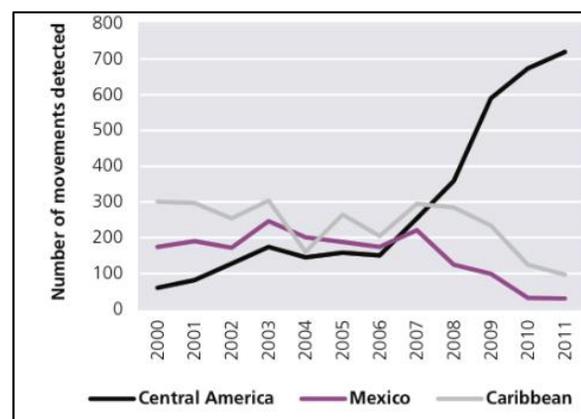
- The establishment of 'narco-estates' – the buying up and clearing of land to create farms to enable money laundering. By 'improving remote land' DTOs can not only convert money into 'untraceable assets', but also mark out territory against rival gangs.

The rise of deforestation from 2007 is not only causing serious damage to a fragile ecosystem, but has left the communities, which neighbour the new routes, completely helpless. Despite several attempts being made by grassroots and conservation groups to address rising rates of deforestation, they have been silenced by intimidation and violence from DTOs and corrupt officials who benefit from such social and ecological destruction.



<< **Figure 1.** The number of larger than expected (>2 ha) forest clearings in eastern Honduras, indicating a connection to drug trafficking.

>> **Figure 2:** Number of primary cocaine movements destined for, or interdicted in, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, 2000-2011. (Source: ONDCP)



* In 2010 – figures from the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP).



Healthy yards & urban agriculture growing in Nicaragua

Barney Thompson examines lessons in urban farming from the Sandinistas in Nicaragua

Globally, food growing in cities is on the rise as improving food security and sustainability on a local level becomes increasingly vital, especially for impoverished communities. As ENCA supporters, we are all too aware of how cultivation of cash crops across large swathes of fertile Central American land has negatively impacted on the availability and affordability of everyday healthy food for the region's people. To counter this, over the last three years the Sandinista government in Nicaragua has been incentivising people in Managua and other urban areas to use their own garden – however small – as a *huerto casero* to provide some of their own food.

This project was launched in Managua in 2010 in conjunction with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and financed by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). Initially 250 low-income families were provided with vegetable seeds, technologies to increase the availability of irrigation water and training from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAGFOR) and the Nicaraguan Institute for Agricultural Technology (INTA). After promising showings, the programme was expanded to a further 250 families in nearby Ciudad Sandino in October 2011. Twelve demonstration plots and training centres have been set up in communities and schools. The FAO

estimate that over the course of the project 9,500 people will benefit from these 'micro gardens' as excess food is sold locally.

This forms part of a wider nationwide programme to tackle malnutrition as well as improve food security by assisting those with access to a small plot of land in rural as well as urban locations. The *Patio Saludable* (Healthy Yards) project providing seeds and training continues to expand; in 2013 more than 100,000 families were targeted. Launched in 2007, the *Zero Hunger* programme focuses specifically on women; over 100,000 have received a "food production package" with pregnant animals, seeds, materials and training. As part of this, 3,750 special bonuses have been provided in Managua, consisting of tools, chickens and a hen house, and plants, seeds and fruit trees.

While the FAO project has focused on improving health through increased cultivation and consumption of vegetables, it has met with some resistance from those with existing fruit trees (and aesthetically pleasing ornamentals), as a study in one Managua *barrio* found out. Diverse fruit is grown, such as mango, avocado, passion fruit, papaya and orange and residents have been reluctant to reduce their fruit output – consumed particularly as the

ubiquitous *refrescos* – as well as give up shade from the tropical sun that the trees provide. Many have therefore dedicated only a small proportion of their *patios* to vegetable growing.

Perhaps inevitably, questions have been raised as to whether the larger national programmes have been rolled out as effectively or equitably as they could be. And naturally the ability of those without access to any land – generally those most impoverished and malnourished – to receive these health and food security benefits remains a thorny issue and one difficult to address.

Nevertheless, it certainly appears that urban access to local and nutritious food is on the rise in Nicaragua. By implementing these and other food-related programmes, the FSLN government was recently praised by the FAO for its work in tackling hunger and malnutrition, calling it "one of the most notable advances in the [Latin American] region."

The longer term success of such initiatives generally requires embedding their methods and principles into the mind-sets of the younger generations. In Masaya, students at two colleges manage large allotments on-site, growing a range of produce such as yucca, squash and plantain. It is economically sustainable

– organic produce is sold to purchase tools and further improve the site – and its learning elements are integrated into the curriculum. This includes demonstrating the wider benefits of these *huertos*: creating favourable micro-climates and more stable soil; people's improved engagement with their local environment and sense of belonging (their so-called *right to the city*); and helping to combat climate change through the reduction of petroleum-based fertilisers and food miles.

Sources:

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Nicaragua News, 'Urban agriculture project to expand' (25/10/11); 'Project Healthy Yards expands' (16/10/12).

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L. Shillington (2013) 'Right to food, right to the city: Household urban agriculture and socio-natural metabolism in Managua, Nicaragua', *Geoforum* 44: 103-111.

New Politics, 'Nicaragua: Hunger, malnutrition and the fight to end them', newpol.org/content/nicaragua-hunger-malnutrition-and-fight-end-them. Canal 4 news clip available: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMm3QUCAuGU

El Nuevo Diario, 'Va proyecto de huertos orgánicos' (15/11/11).

We are interested to hear about other urban food growing initiatives across Central America – please contact us with your stories.

Nicaragua Canal

An update on El Gran Canal from Amy Haworth Johns.

Since the acceptance of HKND's US\$40bn bid to make Nicaragua's dreams of a rival 'Panama Canal' a reality (see ENCA 59, pp.8-9), very little information has reached the concerned international community. A recent publication by scientific journal *Nature* (*Nature* 506, 287–289 [20 February 2014]), echoes national and international fears of the absence of an independent environmental assessment. As the project stands, the Nicaraguan government seems happy to rely solely upon the environmental assessment conducted by HKND which gives cause for concern over the price paid by Nicaraguan sovereignty in the quest for economic development.

In our last newsletter, there stood several proposed routes for the canal. Since then, one route has become the most favoured. It is 286-300 km long with a 90 km section through Lake Nicaragua; a proposed depth of 27.6 metres (Lake Nicaragua has an average depth of 15m so dredging would be necessary); and a width of 520m to rival the Panama Canal and accommodate the post-Panamax ships weighing 400,000 tonnes.

A project of this size may have devastating impacts on the natural environment and ecosystems and may trigger mass evacuation and resettlement on an uncontrollable scale for the communities in its path. In an area of natural fragility and under international protection, the biological impact in the lake alone (dredging, pollution and salt-water intake) threatens the habitats of thousands of species. On land, the proposed route slices through the Mesoamerica

Biological Corridor. Internationally protected since 1997, the division of these lands will create artificially confined territories and disrupt species that have been internationally protected for years.

Finally, as the Nicaraguan population is estimated to increase by 37% by 2050, a mega-project like the canal, which some believe is likely to pollute the largest reservoir of drinking water in the country, should ring all manner of alarm bells. The lack of such alarms is worrying.

After this article was written by Amy, we received the following news item from the Nicaragua Network Bulletin of 13th March 2014.

Canal environmental study to be finished in April

National Assembly Deputy Jenny Martínez announced on Mar. 5 that at the beginning of April the environmental impact study on the inter-oceanic shipping canal across Nicaragua should be finished. She said that studies were done during the rainy season and are being carried out now in the dry season to measure the amount of water in the rivers involved in the possible routes for the proposed canal which would also cross Lake Cocibolca (Lake Nicaragua). Martínez said that the company carrying out the study, Britain-based Environmental Resources Management, is one of the most prestigious in its field.

But highly regarded environmentalist and frequent government advisor



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El Gran Canal Update *Continued from page 11*

Jaime Incer Barquero questioned the validity of the study. He said, "The great fault in this is that, however well respected the company is that does the environmental impact study, the single fact that it was contracted by the same firm that will carry out the project makes the result biased." Incer Barquero said that, so far, President Daniel Ortega has not asked him for advice about the project. "I am totally unconnected with this initiative," he said, adding, "If they invite me, I'll go with pleasure..." He stated that the benefits of a canal would be small compared with the loss of Lake Nicaragua, the largest source of fresh water in Central America.

Former Vice-President and historian Sergio Ramírez also weighed in on the canal. He told the news program *Esta Semana* on Channel 12, "I believe that this is a great smoke screen and I would like to be a fortune teller to know what it is that is behind this smoke screen." He said that the project would require massive excavators and there is no deep water port in Nicaragua where they can be brought into the country. [Editor's note: Two deep water ports are part of the project and at least one of them would, for reasons he points out, have to be built first.] Ramírez went on say, "Here there are fantasies of fantasies. This is a badly put together doll that is going to fall into pieces."

However, environmentalist Kamilo Lara, a member of the advisory council of the Canal Administrative Commission, defended the project saying that "Those who talk about Chinese fairy tales are those who had opportunities, those who have lived the good life in this country, in contrast to the millions of

Nicaraguans who need work and a better quality of life." He noted that the government of President Enrique Bolaños proposed a similar project but it did not move forward. This time, he said, investors from countries such as Russia, Korea, and the United States have expressed interest and the feasibility studies include a complete review of the country's environment, biodiversity, geology, hydrology, geotectonics, and the special characteristics of Lake Nicaragua. (*La Prensa*, Mar. 5, 7; *Informe Pastran*, Mar. 7, 10; *Radio La Primerísima*, Mar. 8)

Recycling in Nicaragua

Five environmental organisations signed an agreement to work together for two years to, in the words of Young Environmentalists member Germán Áreas, "develop actions that are able to contribute to a change in the culture" with regard to recycling. The groups include: Young Environmentalists, Africa 70, RedNica, Nicaraguan Association of Recyclers (ASORENIC), and the Avina Foundation. In addition, the new alliance will mobilize to support passage of a bill on hazardous and non-hazardous solid waste management, and has already held discussions with the Inter-American Development Bank about future project funding. In 2013 up to Dec. 10, Nicaragua had exported 23,593 tons of waste paper. The proposed law would regulate pricing for recyclable products to balance the benefits between recyclers and middlemen. (*La Prensa*, Jan. 15)

International Communications and Volunteer Programme Co-ordinator with The Permaculture Institute of El Salvador (IPES)

IPES is a grassroots non-government organisation of subsistence farmers who practice permaculture for the development of a healthier, wiser and more ecologically sustainable society using the Farmer-to-Farmer methodology. They focus on natural farming and living, food security, capacity and leadership building, and developing stronger communities and local economies.

This is an unpaid internship for which IPES will provide free accommodation. As International Communications and Volunteer Programme Coordinator, you will live on IPES' permaculture demonstration site, 20 minutes outside the old colonial town of Suchitoto, El Salvador. The responsibilities include managing and improving IPES' international and online presence, responding to all international enquiries, providing on-site support to volunteers and working on the development of our permaculture demonstration site. IPES is looking for someone with excellent oral Spanish who can commit to one year.

For more information, please email Maïa Sparrow – volunteer@permacultura.com.sv

ENCA meeting dates

22nd June 2014

12th October 2014

ENCA meetings are held at the NSC's office at the Durham Road Centre. Meetings are held on Sundays from 12:30 pm to 5 pm and we start with lunch which is made up of whatever people attending choose to bring with them to share.