Part 2:
Honduras and Nicaragua: Two Similar Countries with Very Significant Differences

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Nicaragua has been invaded and occupied by the US more times than any country in the Americas, yet in 1979 a revolutionary force called the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) overthrew the brutal, US-backed Somoza dictatorship. For 11 years, the revolutionary Sandinista government fought off a US-funded Contra mercenary army while working to bring literacy, education, health care, housing, and land ownership to the Nicaraguan people. Defeated in a 1990 election in which the US spent more per Nicaraguan voter than both Democrats and Republicans combined spent per US voter in 1988, President Daniel Ortega became the first Nicaraguan president in Nicaragua’s history to pass power peacefully to another party. This ushered in 17 years of neoliberal governments that further impoverished the country as those governments prioritized international debt payments over the needs of the Nicaraguan people. By the election of November 2006, Nicaraguan voters had become fed up with continued privation and voted the Sandinista party back into power headed by Daniel Ortega.

Since returning to the presidency in 2007, and with substantial foreign aid from Venezuela and European countries, Ortega turned Nicaragua into one of the first countries to achieve the UN Millennium Goals of cutting poverty in half by 2015. His first order upon taking office was to make public education free and shortly after to restore a robust public health program. His government’s policies reactivated the peasant agriculture sector which was completely left out of development plans of the neoliberal governments. So, by the time the delegation visited, Nicaragua has become the fastest growing economy in Central America and the most gender equal country in Latin America. It’s police force and army, with their origins in the 1979 revolution, are not feared by the population and are not tools of repression wielded by elites.
Union de Cooperativas Agrícolas de Nueva Segovia (UCANS) is a second-level cooperative, meaning that it organizes and supports an array of base cooperatives. UCANS President Rafael Lovo and base cooperative presidents said that they worked for the passage of Nicaraguan Law 499 which facilitates and supports the formation of cooperatives, and discussed the incredible success the country has had in this sector. The goal of this law and the cooperatives it supports, is to facilitate sustainable social and economic development among the most vulnerable populations, and in the process, to achieve food sovereignty for the nation and steward the environment in the face of climate change.

Lovo discussed that the cooperative movement originated in Sandino’s vision for the nation back in the 1930s. After the revolution, in the 1980s, the Sandinistas pushed hard to support the development of cooperatives, but they couldn’t truly be successful because the war with the Contras impeded development. During the neoliberal period, in the 1990s, the government worked actively to take land away from campesinos who had finally accessed land through the revolution, undermining rural cooperatives. But after the Sandinistas returned to the presidency in 2007, there was a renewed emphasis on cooperatives with a humanitarian vision, a model for non-exploitative, non-extractive rural development and poverty reduction. Law 499 was passed in 2005. The belief behind this law, and the move to cooperatives that it supports, is that cooperatives promote not only economic development, but also social peace, equality between men and women, and the common good.

There are currently 4,918 registered cooperatives in Nicaragua. Nearly a quarter of them are agricultural coops. Overall, half a million Nicaraguans are organized into cooperatives, (in a total population of 6 million), or approximately one-fifth of the country’s labor force. Half of Nicaraguan coffee is produced by cooperatives, and 95 percent of transportation workers are organized into cooperatives. 350 of the coops are explicitly women’s cooperatives, although women have important roles in other cooperatives as well.
Cooperatives suffered under the international financial crisis of 2008, as it impacted the cost of imported necessities, particularly fuel. But even more noticeably, cooperatives (and rural Nicaraguans more generally) suffer from the effects of climate change. Madriz is enduring chronic, climate-change induced drought, but also suffers from periodic catastrophic flooding. In 2014-2015, a flood caused 70 percent of the population in Madriz to lose half of their crops.

UCANS organizes both agricultural cooperatives as well as a community eco-tourism cooperative. The eco-tourism cooperative strives to create an alternative to extractive, elite tourist development, in which visitors can enjoy the natural beauty of the country in a way that is environmentally sustainable, and that brings the economic benefits of tourism directly to the most vulnerable communities. They are working to create a geopark recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site, promote artisanship and handicraft production. Lovo explained that the cooperative sector is the most dynamic in the national economy, and that it is a socio-economic model that can truly respond to the needs of the people. While during the neoliberal period (1990-2006) there was a movement to privatize all basic services, especially health care, and education, since the return of the Sandinistas to governance, education and health care have once more become public, free, and accessible to the people. Indeed, he noted that Hondurans regularly cross the border to access Nicaragua’s free, quality healthcare, including the wide array of mobile clinics. In Nicaragua, access to health care is considered a human right, he explained, so Hondurans are not turned away. During the neoliberal period, he noted, food packages to children were cut off, but now children are fed each day in the schools.

The delegation was impressed by the vitality of the cooperative sector, the support it receives from the government, and the strength of UCANS model for sustainable community development. It is clear that the growth of cooperatives reflects a larger realignment of the country’s political economy to serve and strengthen the most vulnerable communities.

**February 22**

Visit to tourism and community development sites in and around Somoto: local history museum, rosquilla bakery, and Cabañas Gabriela?

The delegation visited a local history museum in Somoto. Museums are both a means to preserve local and national history, but also a strategy to support community development. The guide noted that there are 186 museums in Nicaragua. The delegation was particularly enthusiastic about the museum’s extensive collection of political posters, particularly from the revolutionary era. It was both informative and inspiring.

We also visited a rosquilla bakery, as an example of government-supported microenterprises (small businesses). The bakery was thriving partly due to government loan at concessionary interest rates to finance its huge ovens. While the delegation was impressed by the government support for small businesses, some members were surprised by the fact that bakery workers labored from 3am to 3pm, six days a week, as we expected there would be firmer maximum hour laws in place to protect workers.

Finally, we spent the night at one of the cooperative’s community eco-tourism developments, Cabañas Gabriela, and were treated to cultural performances, including music and dancing. The cabins were gorgeous, underscoring the effectiveness of a community-based tourism development strategy.
Three young women perform a traditional dance to live music at Cabañas Gabriela for the delegation.

February 23

Visit to ecotourism sites with UCANS geocommunity guides in the Somoto area and discussions of cooperative ecotourism as a development tool.

UCANS geocommunity guides spent the day taking delegates to a wide array of eco-tourism and community development sites throughout the area including hand-painted houses, a hike to view ancient pictographs on the canyon wall, and another small museum, Casa Museo, in a remote rural village. The museum was next to a small solar panel array, one of the many sustainable rural electrification projects undertaken by the government. Delegation members were deeply impressed by the beauty of the area and the artisanship and innovation of the people. Once again, we found the cooperative model of economic rural development to be overwhelmingly successful, and UCANS members stressed both members own initiative and profound government support.

Some members of the delegation also began the day with a hike and swim in Cañón Seco to experience this cooperative and microenterprise model of eco-tourism. They were struck both by the natural beauty of the canyon, but also by the guide, Don Clemente’s, discussion of the Sandinista revolution. He discussed his eager participation in the revolution decades ago, and his enthusiasm for the Sandinistas’ return to governance. He was hopeful for continued economic growth in impoverished sections of the country, and clearly s
We had a short meeting with a police captain who has served thirty years with the National Police. He recounted how the National Police was born in 1979-1980 as the Sandinista National Police, after the revolution to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship. The founder of the police force was Tomás Borge, one of the main cofounders of the FSLN, who advocated that the police must forge close relationships with the country’s youth, and must be in constant contact with the people. Because of that closer relationship between the police and the people, he argued, crime has no place in the community. He emphasized, and the delegation members observed, that Nicaragua was marked by tranquility and security, and was the safest country in Central America. Yet he also stressed that it had taken a revolution and a bloody war against the counter-revolutionaries to bring the country to this place of peace and security. It took the sacrifice of “more than fifty thousand dead to get rid of a terrible system.” Women played a major role in the revolution and continue to play a major role in maintaining safety and tranquility in Nicaragua. During the 1980s, he noted, 15-18 percent of the National Police were women; today 40 percent are women, and the commander of the force is a woman.

Doña Lola is photographed in front of the coffee plants they hope to renew in the near future to increase their cooperative’s production of coffee beans.

**February 24**

Meetings with the Cooperativa Gloria Quintanilla in Santa Julia, El Crucero

The women’s cooperative Gloria Quintanilla was formed with 2008, but obtained formal recognition in 2010. At first it was only made up of 16 women, but has grown substantially since then. One of their earliest projects was fundraising and organizing to build 14 houses in the village. At first they thought they were just building houses for 14 of the 16 women, but then they realized they were working for the entire community.

Since then, they have expanded. They frequently work with visiting international service and solidarity groups, sharing skills and knowledge in the process. Through this, they have developed their capacity to compost and create organic fertilizer for their coffee crop. Two years in a row, they’ve received formal recognition as women ecological producers, and the only reason they are not certified organic or fair trade is because of the cost of the certifications. They also travel throughout Central America, sharing their knowledge and experience.

The cooperative makes decisions at assemblies where they strive for consensus. In addition to their work in
housing and coffee, they do social work, without any compensation beyond the inherent benefits it provides to the community. The women noted that there used to be a lot of machismo in their community, including a lot of male violence towards women and children, but they estimate that their organizing has eliminated 90 percent of that machismo. When asked how they achieved this, cooperative members explained that the women empowered themselves and the men came to support them. In addition, they teach their children about gender equality and promote equal responsibility among their sons and daughters.

Illiteracy remains a struggle, but the women who know how to read teach those who don’t, and the cooperative hopes to have completely eliminated illiteracy from their community within the next five years.

The other major problem is lack of economic opportunities. Santa Julia has a 68 percent unemployment rate. People from the community travel other places to work, like Managua, but there are few jobs nearby. The majority of women in the community are single mothers, so they must either forego work to stay with their children, or leave their children to travel to work. The cooperative’s economic initiatives have been specifically designed to allow women to support their families without having to leave them to do so. In addition to growing and marketing coffee, they’ve been focused on local food production; growing plants that can be harvested at different times of year, so that families can eat what they grow. They’ve received support in this from other cooperatives and from the Rural Workers Association (ATC). Not only does growing their own food give them autonomy and allow women to stay with their families, but they point out that it is also healthier and tastier.

Many members of the cooperative are also involved in union work through the ATC. Doña Lola, for example, joined the ATC when she was 14 years old. She explained that the laws that protect workers are very outdated, and that many women in the cooperative started working in agricultural labor as children. There were very few protections. Even now, she notes, the government is good in the sense that it provides roofs and pigs and other forms of support for the poorest and most vulnerable, but it also supports private industry, and that sometimes translates to only weak support for workers. She would like to see more support for unions, and for the government to serve as a mediator between business owners and workers, ensuring that both workers’ rights and contracts are respected. Currently cooperatives receive substantially more support than unions, according to her.

[Editor’s Note: While Doña Lola’s statements reflect her valid experiences, international labor advocates note that since the return of the Sandinista government in 2007, enforcement of labor laws, especially in the Free Trade Zone maquiladora sector, has exceeded that of most countries in the region, especially Honduras where labor laws are not enforced at all. Also of note is that in 2017 the minimum wage for agricultural and textile workers is being raised by 8.5% in a tripartite agreement between the government, unions, and employers. This annual negotiated rise in the minimum wage since 2007 has been credited with sustained labor stability in Nicaragua and a strong attractor of foreign investment.]
February 25

Meetings with the Gloria Quintanilla Cooperative in Santa Julia, El Crucero, continued.

In the morning, Doña Lola gave delegates a tour of the community, including two school buildings they built and painted with their own hands, alongside the community. The cooperative organized the funding and obtained the resources, and then they built them together. They chose an open air design, because other designs felt like a prison. The government pays for one teacher, who teaches 50 students, all the primary student grades together in a single room. For secondary school, students must travel to El Crucero. Most of the women in the cooperative, including Doña Lola, never had the opportunity to go to school.

Arnoldo Alemán, president of the country from 1996-2001, during the neoliberal period, who was convicted of multiple counts of corruption and money laundering, lives nearby on his farm, under house arrest, and the women of the cooperative feel frustrated that he has such tremendous resources, particularly water, and their community has to scrape by. Doña Lola points out that the community has never had easy access to water. Before the revolution, drinking water was rationed to 20 liters per family per week. In order to wash or bathe, families had to collect rainwater or walk 8 km to a pipe. In 2004, during the neoliberal period, pipes were installed, but the water only arrived every seven months for years. Now the water flows through the pipes twice a week, but because they don’t have big tanks to store it, people in the community fill plastic jugs to save the water. They irrigate their crops with rainwater they collect by fashioning cisterns in the ground. The community has a well that was built after the revolution in 1980, but it was damaged in 1998. Doña Lola notes that Alemán has three working wells and uses them for agriculture. Santa Julia is about to break ground on a new well thanks to their organizing and fundraising efforts, even though they currently don’t have funding to complete it. They are very optimistic about the impact that the well will have on their ability to feed themselves, because the land is fertile if they can irrigate it. They do have electricity; the government is paying for their connection to the grid.

Doña Lola points out that the ATC has contributed a lot to the community of Santa Julia: helping men and women get organized into coops and unions, supporting their struggle for land since 1979, and helping people activity in the community, and views herself as a protector of the community.
Later, Doña Lola recounted the history of Santa Julia to the delegates, putting the cooperative’s work in historical perspective. Santa Julia used to be a finca called Alemania, but when World War II broke out, the German owner lost the land to Somoza who renamed it Santa Julia. It was a coffee plantation that Somoza operated, and life was incredibly hard for the workers. There were no houses for the workers, just shacks which were the property of the finca owner, in which entire families slept and lived on 3-level bunk beds. There were 500 people living in these camps. The workday was 5 am to 5 pm, and during that time, the shacks were locked so that even if you could not work because of illness you could not stay in your bed.

During this time, Doña Lola described, there were no schools, no health care, and no rights. They were literally enslaved as they only received the meager food and housing provided. Then came the revolution, however, and everything changed. “Somoza fled and the land became ours. We had to pinch ourselves,” she recounted. They abandoned the camps “because we didn’t want to live like animals” and divided the land among the community. Each family built houses with plastic and chunks of wood and a little patio. “We realized we needed water, needed to learn to read and write. The revolution began to organize us in groups for study and leadership, and that let us think for ourselves, and decide what path we’d take as Santa Julia.”

The community had ten years of “living happily, experimenting to see how we could progress.” But then, with the election of 1990 that ushered in the neoliberal period under the governance of Violeta Chamorro, Arnoldo Aleman, and Enrique Bolaños (1990-2006), things shifted dramatically for the worse. Doña Lola recounted that Chamorro had a “rightist mentality” and she sent legal notice that the people of Santa Julia must surrender their land to the state. For five years, they tried an array of legal methods to keep their lands, but “all doors were closed to us.” Finally, in 1995, the women of the community proposed occupying the highway in Managua in protest. The men initially dismissed the idea, but ultimately followed the women, and 31 families set up camp, 179 people. “We took everyone,” she recounted, “including pregnant women, old folks, and children, in order to embarrass the government.” They received a lot of support in Managua, particularly from University students, and the demonstration continued for four months, until the president conceded and gave the community their land. Some members of the community were arrested; Doña Lola was actually arrested twice, but never incarcerated. Instead they drove her back to Santa Julia and instructed her not to return to the demonstration site, but she cut her long hair off and changed from a skirt to pants, and snuck back into the camp disguised. The military and police, still profoundly Sandinista in some ways, remained neutral. They didn’t actively support the demonstration, but “didn’t come to kill them either.” Once they successfully gained title to their land, they had to struggle for water, as detailed above.

One delegate asked how the community in Santa Julia knew they were free after the revolution, and Doña Lola answered, “Nobody came to tell us; we were the revolution” and she then detailed the members of the community who had fought and sacrificed for the Sandinistas. She added, though, that the hardest part was actually after the revolution, when the United States instituted an embargo, and Nicaraguans suffered without access to sufficient food or medicine, and when the U.S.-supported Contras fought to overthrow revolution, using torture and terror as part of the war.

Another delegate asked about women’s empowerment in Santa Julia. Doña Lola explained that, as a child, during the time of Somoza, she had been raped, and that such sexual abuse and domestic violence was considered normal at the time. Gradually, as the women organized and attended workshops, the women began to realize that if they wanted the community to progress, they had to begin with their own households, refusing to tolerate violence and abuse from the men in their lives. Doña Lola recounted that her husband showed up to find her at an ATC meeting one time, and in a rage began shooting at the ground around her feet. She described feeling so ashamed, that the following day, she dropped the gun down the latrine, and took their kids and left him. She and the children lived with her mother for the next six months, and he showed up regularly to beg forgiveness. Finally, she agreed to go back with him if he committed to not drink, not own weapons, and never raise a hand to her again except in greeting. She points out that, over time, he has changed. Twelve years later and they are still together. He supports her organizing work and shares responsibility in the home. He publically speaks about how he used to be violent, but has learned not to be. The women in the cooperative have both...
educated and empowered themselves and educated the men in their community through personal relationship and workshops.

She noted that she would like to have workshops more explicitly addressing LGBT issues or abortion, because the laws against abortion in Nicaragua are extreme - it is a crime even if the life of the mother is in danger – but she feels they do an otherwise good job educating the youth in the community about sex, and making sure they have access to birth control and reproductive health care.

The history of Santa Julia is reproduced here in such detail because the delegation felt it vividly captured the Nicaraguan model of sustainable development aimed at supporting the most vulnerable, as well as people’s pride at the role they have taken in fighting and struggling for all of their gains, and even to have such a revolutionary government in place.
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