

# Rural Community Water Project in Chinandega & Leon, Nicaragua.

Nicaragua is located in the heart of Central America, bordered by the countries of Honduras and El Salvador to the North and Costa Rica to the South. It is the third poorest country in the Americas and faces major challenges of inequity and poverty, which affect women and children most severely.

For many impoverished nations, an increased standard of living is as simple as securing a potable water source. Water is a basic human need, but in many countries, such as Nicaragua, potable water is a luxury.

The Rural Community Water Project takes place in the departments of Leon and Chinandega in the northwest of Nicaragua. This region of Nicaragua has been particularly susceptible to tremendous damage as a result of natural phenomena. In 1998, this was the area hardest hit by Hurricane Mitch, resulting in extensive flooding, mudslides, destruction of homes, loss of life, and complete loss of harvests. In 2001, while still in the midst of trying to recover from the devastation of Mitch, the region was hit by a severe drought, which resulted in the loss of virtually 100% of agricultural production in the first harvest cycle of the year.

The effects of natural phenomena are aggravated by extensive degradation of soil quality as a result of extensive deforestation, past reliance on cash crops like cotton, and overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The latter has also contributed to the contamination of the water table. In addition, as a result of deforestation, aquifers once closer to the surface of the land have disappeared. The local farmers comment that life in their region is always either a case of too much water (flooding and hurricanes) or not enough (drought).



The population in this region of Nicaragua is primarily rural, with only two major cities to speak of. Most of the population live on plots of land of 2 manzanas (2000 m<sup>2</sup>) or less, where they essentially grow enough for their families to live on, with little to no excess production for marketing. The traditional crops grown in the region are corn, beans, wheat and sesame: given the lack of cash income for families, most of the diet in the region comes exclusively from these crops.

Access to potable water is still a problem for the majority of Nicaraguans living in rural areas. Structural adjustment programs have decreased public expenditures in this arena, thus diminishing the possibility of providing potable water to the most needy. In 1998, Nicaragua paid over a million dollars in debt services and interest on the national debt, while investing less than one fifth of that into projects related to the provision of potable water. As a result, alternative means of providing potable water, independent from the actions taken by the government, are being sought - particularly in rural areas, where the government has taken less of an interest in satisfying the needs of the population.



The problem of access to potable water is one that especially affects women and children. The responsibility of guaranteeing the availability of this vital resource for day-to-day activities falls on the shoulders of the women. In order to fulfil this responsibility, women and children walk many kilometres daily to secure their water supply. Compounding this problem is the poor quality of the water available: often the water accessed places the family's already deteriorated health at risk. In addition, extreme poverty in these communities has resulted in elevated levels of malnutrition, causing low immune responses to many water borne illnesses.



**CHANGE FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATION (CFCA)** is an Edmonton-based non-profit, non-governmental organization with a 30-year history of working for sustainable, grassroots community development in Latin America and the Philippines. Our development projects, their cost and priority, are determined by our Southern partners according to the needs of their communities. In Canada, our education program engages the public in a process of awareness raising, analysis and action on issues of global justice.

Water is a **basic human need and should be recognized as a HUMAN RIGHT!** This project has been formulated to meet that need by improving access to potable water in 20 communities in the municipalities of Chinandega and Leon. While wells currently exist in some of these communities, they are insufficient to meet the needs of the 1578 families currently residing there: a total of 8,424 persons have only partial access to water fit for human consumption. The dry summer weather and shallow nature of these existing wells make them susceptible to drying, forcing community members to walk long distances in search of new sources of water – water that is often unsuitable for human consumption. This responsibility falls to the women and children of the communities, making it necessary for them to walk for kilometres carrying heavy buckets of water before they can begin their daily activities.

Although in general the Central Government, and more specifically the Department of Rural Aqueducts and Drains (Enacal), should attend to the water needs of the target communities and the respective local governments should carry out the necessary management, these agencies are not always successful in fulfilling their duties. They explain that mini rural aqueducts have not been constructed and while wells are abundant, many are contaminated and the majority are private which complicates universal access to potable water.



The municipal governments presiding over these 20 communities do not have the funds required to adequately address the needs of their respective populations, resulting in a serious threat to human health. The Nicaragua government has no immediate plans to

improve services to these communities: this region has largely been forgotten by the powers that be. It is the birth-



place of the Nicaraguan revolution, and the communities there consistently vote for the Sandinista Party when electing mayors, members of Congress and their National President. As a result, the Liberal governments have largely neglected the needs of the region as it is of no political consequence to them. During the drought of 2001, for example, which occurred during a presidential election campaign in Nicaragua, the President refused to declare a state of emergency or offer any aid to the region, claiming that the effects and extent of the drought were being exaggerated by the Sandinista mayors of the region for political reasons despite the fact that international organizations - including the World Food Organization - were acknowledging the existence of a

humanitarian crisis in the region. In the face of such governmental neglect, NGO's like Centro Humboldt and El Bloque, Change for Children's partner organizations on this project, play a critical role in providing crucial basic support and services to the people of these communities.



## Water is a Human Right!

A key component of this project is the campaign to have water recognized as a human right in Nicaragua and in Canada. The privatization of water utilities in Nicaragua is underway and prices for this basic service is on the rise and soon to be out of reach for the majority of the population.



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