



Agrovivienda – A Housing Project for Small Farmers in Masaya, Nicaragua

**The Background
March 2003**

HOW THE PROJECT STARTED

The Chartered Institute of Housing Presidential Appeal in 1998/99 raised £70,000 for a housing project for small farmers in the rural area around the city of Masaya in Nicaragua. John Perry, former CIH Policy Director, is now working in Nicaragua to co-ordinate the project. The farmers are already organised in a self-help network to improve the working methods on their farms. The project will build on this success to enable groups of farmers to work together to build better homes for their families.

Nicaragua is now the second poorest country in the western hemisphere and people in the countryside are even worse off than those in the towns. Farmers took the brunt of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which destroyed crops and washed away soil. Then in July 2000 the Masaya region was hit by an earthquake which damaged nearly 3000 homes. The project fund (together with the Leicester Masaya Link Group) provided emergency help for twelve families who lost their homes completely. Now the aim is to help about 100 families build permanent homes.

There is a shortage of at least 7,000 houses in Masaya. The local council has very limited funds and no building programme. There are a number of local agencies working with international funding. Most of these projects run on a self-build basis and many have been successful in galvanising community support.



But many of the projects have run into problems, mainly as a result of the economic situation. Either they have found it impossible to run programmes for the poorest groups, or they have had to rely on donations with no repayment by the beneficiaries (so the programmes are limited by the initial sums available), or where there are repayments they have had problems in collecting them. Building costs have escalated and it is now difficult to build a basic house at an affordable cost.

The challenge is to find ways of running a housing project which is more sustainable than those currently operating, in the following ways:

- based on a proper assessment of what people want
- genuinely community-run
- providing very basic housing at the lowest possible cost
- but of good enough quality to provide a sound structure, and
- a house extendable and repairable by the owner
- help owners improve their incomes so as to repay loans for the cost of materials.

Agrovivienda is a project supported by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Leicester Masaya Link Group, to improve housing and living conditions amongst subsistence farmers in the region of Masaya, Nicaragua. For more information, visit www.cih.org or contact John Perry, project co-ordinator (jperry@ibw.com.ni). For information on how to make a financial contribution, contact Claire Plumb at 0116 223 2272 or email (leicester@masaya.fsworld.co.uk).

All of these elements of a sustainable project are found in Masaya at present, but no single project has them all. Hence the challenge!

The project is part of a wider programme working with poor farmers in the Masaya area to improve the productivity of their farms through organic methods. This programme, run by local organisation ADIC (Association for Community Integration and Development), is strongly community-based. It began ten years ago, and the network now includes more than 100 farmers and their families. In many cases, their land had been exhausted through modern farming methods of growing single crops with heavy use of chemicals, either through soil erosion or because the farmers could no longer afford the chemicals required.

Most of the farmers have had bad experiences before acquiring their small parcels of land. Some worked as day labourers, cutting cotton, typically getting up at 2.00am and returning home at 7.30pm, with minimal wages. Others struggled to acquire land but were then defeated by the high cost of bank loans for seed and fertiliser. Yet others had a history of working the land as insecure tenants, eventually being awarded smallholdings through land reform programmes, only to find it difficult to survive in a changed economic climate.

ADIC has introduced them to farming methods which protect the natural fertility of the land, enabling them to earn more and begin to improve their living conditions. Families now have a secure food supply, a modest income and secure land tenure, and at the same time the wider environment benefits from their changed methods of farming.



However, all the farmers still have poor houses. Typically a family of two adults and perhaps 4-6 children will have a small house 20 metres square, built of planks or rushes, roofed with bamboo and thatch, with an earth floor. Internal subdivision is makeshift. Such shelters provide poor protection from heavy rains and can collapse in earth tremors. The cost of materials for a new house, around \$2,000, compares with a typical annual income of perhaps \$500. Farmers face obstacles of high interest rates and difficulty in getting credit.

The project will build on the farmers' successful experience of cooperative working. A "revolving fund" will recoup and reinvest the costs of materials. The farmers will work collectively in small groups to construct the houses, having been trained in basic building methods but also with skilled supervision on site.

The project is being planned with the farmers and their families. The aim is to build collective commitment to the project and to the principle of paying into the revolving fund. This will enable more houses to be built for more farmers, and will itself help to attract other families into the sustainable agriculture programme.

Agrovivienda is a project supported by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Leicester Masaya Link Group, to improve housing and living conditions amongst subsistence farmers in the region of Masaya, Nicaragua. For more information, visit www.cih.org or contact John Perry, project co-ordinator (jperry@ibw.com.ni). For information on how to make a financial contribution, contact Claire Plumb at 0116 223 2272 or email (leicester@masaya.fsworld.co.uk).