



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

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WOMEN FROM 'LAS FLORES' JOIN THE FARMING PROJECT

Agrovivienda will be one of a group of projects run by a community-based organisation in Masaya, called ADIC. The working methods – community-led, participative, promoting the role of women as well as men – are common to all the projects. One of them, Mujer Naturaleza, helps women to take more responsibility on their small family farms, and learn new agricultural techniques. This project is just starting, and uses as 'promoters' women who were involved in earlier farming projects and who will be part of the housing project when it starts.

At 8.00 in the morning on 13 March, twenty-four women waited by the side of the dirt track in Las Flores, a scattered settlement only a few miles north of Masaya, but a difficult journey along unmade roads. They clambered into the pick-up for a half-hour journey to a more remote place, Santa Clara, to meet a woman farmer, Simona, who was to tell them about the project she had been part of, explain how she had benefited, and show them her farm.

Simona began not with words but by calling her chickens, which immediately set the other women talking because they were not the local breed but more impressive Rhode Island hens. Simona explained how the project had enabled her to buy the hens, grow the best food for them, give them injections herself against common diseases, and – most importantly – gain a bigger and more dependable income because of their high productivity. The five birds she started with had produced more than 150 which she had sold, as well as daily supplies of eggs.

After she had captured everyone's attention she told us how her life had changed through the project. Originally, she and her husband were landless. They joined a small co-operative following the Sandinista revolution, but when the Sandinistas lost power in 1990 they ended up with just the few acres they have now. Until the project started, Simona had played little part in the farm work, but she convinced her husband to let her use a small part of the land to try to new methods of sustainable farming that the project introduced. She began with tree planting, to shield the farm from wind, provide firewood and produce leaves for natural fertiliser and insecticides.



Simona showing the other women her plant nursery

She created several plant nurseries, tended by her children, which provide plants for the farm and also plants (such as roses) to sell. The children themselves keep some of the income from selling plants, and with this they buy their exercise books for school. (Simona pointed out

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that before the project started, the family couldn't afford the costs of the kids going to school – uniform, books, transport, none of which are subsidised – now they can.)

After the morning with Simona, and lunch at the neighbouring farm (rice, chicken and vegetables, cooked for about 30 people in a typical rural kitchen, fuelled with firewood from the farm), it was the women's turn to think about and discuss the future of their own farms. First, they were each asked to draw plans of the farms as they are now. Most started to draw rather child-like pictures of an idealised house with trees on either side. Some then decided to start again, leaving empty space where they had barren land that was only partially productive.



The woman who produced the most satisfactory plan, Jacinta (pictured left), was the only one unable to read and write. Another woman had to label the house, the water tank, the latrine, and so on, for her. It took about an hour of drawing, redrawing and animated discussion for the plans to be completed.

The next step was to draw each farm as it might be in the future. This was the chance for the women to set down their first ideas on what they want to achieve, perhaps inspired by what they had seen during the morning.



One of the pairs of drawings emerged showed the scale of the task ahead. On the right (above) is a drawing of one of the farms as it is now, with exhausted soil and devoid of trees. A ditch running through the middle will be a fast stream in the rainy season.



The other picture shows its owner's aspirations for the future. It shows trees, plantains, a nursery, pigs and hens.

After a day of discussions and plans for the future the real work will start soon as the small technical team visits each farm. Later in March they will join the eighty women in total who are beginning the project, to discuss progress so far and elect a steering group which will begin to take responsibility for the project's direction. Future bulletins will report what happens.

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