



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

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UK EMBASSY FUNDS WATER CISTERNS PROJECT

Prior to the housing project, work is taking place to install water cisterns in the farms, to enable them to be more productive during the dry season. The June bulletin reported on a pilot project with five farmers. Since then we have received a grant of \$6,000 from the British Embassy. Combined with funding from the Leicester-Masaya Link Group, this allowed more than forty extra cisterns to be built in July and August.

When the last bulletin was issued, we were waiting to hear from the embassy whether our bid for funds from their small grants scheme was successful: it was. The embassy was keen to start work quickly, so we began a series of meetings with farmers from different parts of the rural area around Masaya, beginning on 1st July. The aim was to find out how many of the farmers wanted and needed cisterns, and work out a budget based on their contributing as much as they could afford in terms of labour and help with transport and materials.

As we said in the last bulletin, the water cisterns are (usually) open-topped tanks built of concrete, for water storage in the dry season. Mostly this is mains water, which can be very intermittent indeed (as will be clear from one of the stories below). But rainwater and water drawn from wells is also being used by some of the farmers. In the pilot project, the average cost was \$154, or a bit less than £100 per cistern.

The first group, from the community of Santa Clara, actually started building work on 16 July. It was immediately apparent that costs would not be as low for the bigger project as they had been for the pilot one. The rainy season had started, communities like Santa Clara are several kilometres from the city along rough tracks, and these had turned to quagmires in places. Transport costs would inevitably be higher.



Lorena Cano (pictured this page), from the Santa Clara area, built her cistern alongside the well that provides her drinking and irrigation water. This provides more accessible water storage. She had a loan of \$132 from the project fund, and her own labour and other contributions came to \$64.

The few farmers who have their own wells at least have a reliable source of water that is under their direct control. Some have no mains water

at all, and either share supplies or have to buy water from water vendors who use ox carts to carry water from farm to farm in old oil drums.

The families in Las Flores should be well placed because the whole community has mains water. But as Petrona Mendes (first picture this page) explains, her household



has had no water for four months. The mains supply in this area is totally unreliable. But this doesn't make the cistern redundant. She can use it to store the water that she buys (sometimes paying the equivalent of one pound for each drum). And when there is mains water again, perhaps in the middle of the night, she can take full advantage of it to fill the cistern.

Altogether, by early August, 41 farming families had built water cisterns, ranging in size from 800 to almost 2000 (U.S) gallons. The average cost was almost \$190, rather more than the average for the pilot project, but much less than the original budget forecast. The farmers will repay the materials costs at about \$10 per month, at zero interest. This will provide a fund for further cisterns and for further agricultural development work with the farmers themselves.

There is an ironic twist to this story: this project may be one of the last to be funded by the UK embassy, which is now due to be closed next year as a cost-saving measure. Similar closures will be made in neighbouring Honduras and El Salvador. The future of the small grant fund, which allowed the cisterns to be built, is uncertain too.



Above: Maria Lopez Vasquez and family, with their fully-enclosed water cistern

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/nicaragua/index.htm 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@masava.fsworld.co.uk).