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Permaculture For A Sustainable Nicaragua: Consultation, Education And Action

Peter Devereux (representing Fundacion A. C. Sandino)

[Submitted Paper]

This presentation will explain the work of the Nicaraguan Fundacion A. C. Sandino (FACS) in its efforts to develop and promote a popular style permaculture booklet for use with the grassroots communities with whom it works.

FACS is a private non profit organisation. It was created in 1980 to complement and expand the efforts of Nicaraguan grassroots organisations, unions, and communities to build a peaceful, self reliant society.

FACS gives priority to programs that embrace:

- Integrated rural development.
- Rural economic recovery.
- Environmental protection.
- Microenterprise development.
- Reintegration of displaced returned, and demobilised people, and refugees.
- Preventative health and education.
- Housing training and technical assistance.
- Credit.
- Disaster and emergency relief.

The Foundation programs are designed to build leadership and problem solving skills by involving recipients in all aspects of project development including initial identification of needs, project implementation, and evaluation. Annually there is also a FACS assembly bringing together project partners: both local participants and donors to review the year's activities and plan together future activities.

Through this participatory approach the foundation works to strengthen the capacity of Nicaraguan communities and organisations to create realistic and sustainable solutions to pressing social and economic needs.

FACS's work is also part of the emerging and exciting permaculture work in Mexico, El Salvador, Cuba, Ecuador and Chile amongst other countries of the Latin American region.

The initiative began as a result of the translation of the Principles Of Permaculture chapter from Bill Mollison's *Introduction to Permaculture* book, by a Nicaraguan translation student. That happened before the completion of the Spanish version of the whole *Introduction to Permaculture* book which was printed in New Mexico in 1994. The translation was not an unnecessary duplication of the other though because it incorporated Nicaraguan Spanish words and expressions as opposed to simply the "official Spanish equivalent", an important aid for the more ready acceptance and integration of the ideas and principles presented.

FACS circulated photocopies of the finished translation to organisations working for sustainable agriculture in Nicaragua and received very favourable feedback. The organisations complained however, that the text was not directly accessible to agricultural promoters and technicians let alone poor peasant farmers or *campesinos*. So FACS set about the task of turning the Spanish permaculture principles chapter into a pictorial booklet that would be accessible and directly useful not only for agricultural promoters and technicians but also directly with *campesinos*.

FACS made a successful proposal to the Melbourne-based Permaculture Global Assistance Network (PGAN) for financial assistance with the facilitation of the Overseas Service Bureau. FACS sought out the skills of a popular education organisation to help translate the text from written Spanish to pictorial everyday Spanish and more importantly to show local examples of permaculture principles being applied in Central America.

The first draft was circulated amongst organisations working in popular education and sustainable agriculture, and amongst the grass roots communities that collaborate directly with FACS in their everyday work.

This consultation brought a rich diversity of clarifications, criticisms and acclaim to the document. With the incorporation of these changes and an important strengthening to the emphasis on the positive role of women, the booklet was ready to print but not before FACS decided it was so pleased with the result it would scrape and save from other bits of its budget to double the final print run on the document, to two thousand copies

The result has been very successful and positive through grassroots workshops. One hundred copies of the booklet called *Living Agriculture* or *agricultura viva* were also donated to the La Havana Cuba permaculture project.

What then were the reasons behind the success of this permaculture initiative in Nicaragua? It is always hard to be certain but central I believe were:

1. The request for permaculture assistance came from a local organisation with good local credibility and a strong agricultural social base in Nicaragua.
2. FACS managed development, production and promotion of the permaculture material with my permaculture input and funds and back-up support and guidance from PGAN as a result of Overseas Service Bureau facilitation.
3. The educational permaculture material was not only produced in Spanish, it was produced in Nicaraguan Spanish with Nicaraguan local sayings and jokes etc.

4. There was a long consultative process not only with NGOs working in sustainable agriculture but also directly with campesinos individually and through agricultural unions etc.
5. The material was not only text but had a large proportion of drawings and was told like a story not a textbook.
6. The booklet focused on permaculture principles but used local Central American examples to illustrate the principles and encourage integration of the different techniques into a holistic permaculture system.
7. The booklet was used in workshops on local existing “model” farms where the local campesino could show neighbouring campesinos what he or she had done and how, without large external inputs but with dedication and commitment to sustainable agriculture.

Peter Devereux worked for four years (1991-95) with the Sandino Foundation as an environmental adviser and has recently completed a Permaculture booklet entitled Living Agriculture.