

Rights to food, health care, education, gender equality

Urban, rural
& indigenous
property rights

Gender equity
& peasant
feminism

The difference
Fairtrade makes

Caribbean style
Maypole

NSC building
brigade 1984



The Human Rights of the majority

NSC chair James Poke interviews human rights lawyer Dan Kovalik about the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, why the spirit of the declaration became so fragmented during the Cold War, and what this means today for countries like Nicaragua.

JP What is the background to the Covenants on Human Rights?

DK This goes back to the UN Charter agreed after World War II. [The Covenants] take two forms but neither is legally binding.

One is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: essentially the right to free speech, freedom of religion, and the right to organise and protest.

The second is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which calls on governments to provide things like social security, food, water, and welfare rights.

But the West in general and the US in particular value the first above the second. In fact, the US has never even ratified the second covenant, while it is a signatory to the first one. And so, when the US for example looks at Cuba or Nicaragua, they focus on the free speech, freedom of assembly, democratic rights, etc., and they really don't care whether those countries are good at educating their people or providing healthcare.

JP What is the reason for this different emphasis?

DK In capitalist countries, their constitutions tend to provide for civil and political rights, but not the other kind. The mantra of the US is essentially to claim that economic rights will inevitably infringe on civil and political rights. Essentially, it's an anti-socialist perspective, and they actually see those rights as bad.

JP How is this relevant to Nicaragua?

DK Nicaragua, I would argue, is good at protecting both sets of rights. For example, it's done a great job providing free healthcare. The Sandinista government has built to date 24 state-of-the-art hospitals, and provided free education. Nicaragua is now almost

100% food sovereign, meaning almost all the food they eat they grow themselves.

But they have also built a democracy from the ashes of the dictatorship they overthrew. They've done very well with women's rights in particular: Nicaragua is now ranked number 7 in the world for gender equality, much higher than the US and UK. Yet the US criticises Nicaragua for alleged shortcomings in civil and political rights, ignoring what they do in the social and economic sphere.

JP Given claims in the West of supposed human rights abuses by the Sandinista government, what is the reality?

DK During the 2018 coup attempt, violent [opposition] groups held the country hostage. They set up roadblocks in major cities, destroying the economy. They beat people up, they raped people, killed people, destroyed public property, wreaking havoc throughout the country. Shockingly over 200 people died including 22 police officers.

The government arrested people responsible for this mayhem, including some of the intellectual authors of those crimes, some of whom were politically prominent: not for their political beliefs or their party affiliations but because they were involved in the violence.

When people look at countries like Nicaragua, they need to understand the history, that the US has done everything to promote dictatorship and undermine democracy; criticising the Sandinistas for shortcomings in democracy is hypocritical.

People need to see what the Sandinistas have done: made Nicaragua into a much more democratic country that guarantees social and economic rights for the vast majority, those who are impoverished who've benefited most from the Revolution.

NICARAGUA NOW

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The Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign has taken all reasonable care to ensure that the information in this issue of Nicaragua Now is accurate at date of publication.

NSC and NSCAG work with Nicaraguan organisations and social movements promoting social, economic and environmental justice by promoting and seeking support for their work in the UK.

We do this through:

- * UK speaker tours by representatives of Nicaraguan partner organisations
- * raising awareness about Nicaragua from the perspective of partner organisations
- * collaborating with other organisations working in solidarity with Nicaragua and Latin America

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NSC, twin towns, and local projects

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Tackling entrenched poverty using a holistic, well integrated approach

‘Hunger, poverty, and illiteracy are major issues plaguing much of the world, and climate change is one of the greatest threats to humans on the planet. Nicaragua is setting an example for sustainable development that addresses all these issues.’

RICK KOHN

professor of Animal Science, University of Maryland

Neoliberal governments from 1990 – 2007 functioned on the trickle-down assumption that poverty reduction comes about through economic growth, minimising the role of the state, privatisation of public services... and offering crumbs to the impoverished.

The incoming Sandinista government faced the immense task of breaking entrenched cycles of poverty that affected nearly half the population, particularly rural women. Within days of coming to power they set about addressing two key pillars of change by introducing free universal education and health care.

Through comprehensive, well integrated National Development Plans, the government has focused on reducing poverty and hunger in a way that addresses the root causes of poverty: all programmes complement and build on each other. These plans coupled with maintaining a mixed economy and economic stability, have resulted in poverty levels being reduced from 48.3% to 24.9% in ten years. This has been achieved despite US sanctions, an attempted coup, the pandemic, and climate related crises such as hurricanes.

HEALTH CARE universal system based on a community health care model based on prevention: budget increased by 274%, 24 new hospitals, 178 maternity homes 3,000 health centres. [SEE PAGE 4]

EDUCATION free universal education from preschool to further education and technical colleges, extending provision by upgrading infrastructure and improving the quality of teaching. [SEE PAGE 6]

ELECTRICITY Connectivity of less than 50% of the population & daily power cuts of up to 14 hours has been transformed into stable supplies to 99% of the country, especially important in rural areas. Seventy per cent of energy is from renewable sources (solar, wind, geothermal, biogas) compared to 26% in 2006.

ROADS New highways have been built connecting the Pacific and Caribbean coasts for the first time; improved roads throughout the country and a subsidised public transport system provide greater freedom of movement for all.

GENDER EQUALITY 2012 legislation states that 50% of those elected to posts at all levels from National Assembly to local government must be women. This measure and many gender equality social programmes have resulted in Nicaragua scoring seventh overall in the 2022 Global Gender Gap ranking published by the World Economic Forum, and first in political empowerment.

SUPPORTING THE SOCIAL ECONOMY 70% of Nicaragua’s population is employed in the social economy: small & medium businesses & farms, co-operatives, associations, and self-employed workers. In 2012, the government set up the Ministry of the Cooperative, Associative, Community, and Family Economy (MEFCCA) as a recognition of this sector’s importance in strengthening the economy and societal bonds as well as empowering women.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY Over 80% of basic food consumed is grown in Nicaragua, and the country has largely eliminated hunger. Gender equality programmes mean that women have played a significant role in this achievement. A Zero Hunger law provides resources & low interest loans for women; other measures include training, creating markets for producers to sell products, encouraging value added production and diversifying crops. Reducing poverty enables better management of soil, water, forest, diversification to mitigate against climate change, and reduce greenhouse gases.

Securing property rights of the impoverished & indigenous peoples

In 2007 the government inherited an ‘archipelago’ of structures, property insecurity, small scale farmers on land without titles, land trafficking, a chaotic land registry, and innumerable property conflicts.

Within the framework of the National Development Plan, the government has addressed these issues through all institutions working together on a well-integrated framework. This focused on the rights of those most impoverished, gender equity, and historical land rights of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.



Urban families receive titles to their houses

To date over 450,000 land titles have been granted, benefiting 1.8 million families to land and housing in urban and rural areas.

For the first time in Nicaragua’s history the ancestral rights of indigenous and Afro-

descendant peoples on the Caribbean Coast have been recognised: this includes the rights to land and rivers over an area that covers over 30% of Nicaragua’s national territory.

Nicaragua's Free Universal Health Care System

***Becca Renk, who has lived and worked in Nicaragua for the past 22 years, contrasts neoliberal and Sandinista health care models.**

Neoliberal health care

State-of-the-art public hospitals - or even ones that aren't actively violating basic hygiene protocols - are a relatively new phenomenon. During 16 years of neoliberal rule health care was effectively privatised. The political will of successive governments to provide even the minimum of care for free was nil. This led to extreme deterioration of the public system resulting in patients being pushed into the private sector.

Nicaragua's elite took advantage of the business opportunities to make hefty profits by building private clinics and hospitals. In this two-tier system, private hospitals were the gold standard and public hospitals became the last resort - and even there everything had a cost. Doctors often turned patients away for lack of gloves to examine them; patients were given prescriptions that they couldn't afford.

Patients needing surgery had to bring their own alcohol, gauze, and sutures and family members had to donate the blood they would need. Laboratory tests, specialised treatment, and surgery were so expensive that poor families could only access the service through a desperate scramble to raise the funds.

Fortunately, that is no longer the case. Today, the best care can't be bought because it's available free of charge. However, Nicaraguans got so used to the unjust two-tiered system, that many families still believe they have to make financial sacrifices to seek private care.

*Becca works with the Jubilee House Community and the Center for Development in Central America (JHC-CDCA) on sustainable community development programmes and a health clinic. The JHC-CDCA also has a solidarity cultural center, a place to stay, and/or an opportunity to join a health delegation 21-30 October 2023
www.casabenjaminlinder.org/

Revolutionised Health Care

Since 2007 the Sandinista government has made a long-term financial investment in public health a priority.

This investment has led to the most extensive and well-equipped public health system in Central America. This includes:

- 24 new hospitals with high technology equipment and medical specialists
- 15 more new hospitals under construction or planned
- 181 casas maternas (maternity homes) where rural women can stay two weeks before their due date attended by medical staff, and give birth in the hospital
- 190 natural medicine clinics, guaranteeing care with sensitivity to cultural identity
- And many more new facilities

Investment leads to results:

- Cervical cancer mortality reduced by 25%
- Maternal mortality reduced by 70%
- Infant mortality reduced by 56%
- Chronic malnutrition reduced by 46% in children under five and 66% in children six to 12
- Average life expectancy increased by three years for men and women alike

Access to specialised care has drastically changed with services such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy now offered in regional hospitals as well as the capital. Local doctors perform heart surgery and kidney transplants.

“Health care 1990-2007: For Nicaragua's poor majority, public hospitals became the place where you went to die...unless your family could afford to save you.”

BECCA RENK

Family and community health care model since 2007

Nicaragua has a family and community-based model of health care with emphasis on prevention that has been extremely effective. A network of over 60,000 lay health care workers and volunteers attend patients in their homes and go door to door doing health education, mosquito eradication, vaccinations and census taking.

For example, in three weeks, this year's annual vaccination campaign applied 2.3 million doses of vaccines to prevent childhood diseases, flu and pneumonia as well as 1.3 million doses of anti-parasite medication and more than 720,000 doses of vitamin A to children aged 1 to 6.

Additionally, 94.6% of Nicaraguans aged two and up have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and 45.3% have received two booster shots. Thanks in large part to its community-based health care model, Nicaragua fared well in the pandemic; the World Health Organisation has reported that Nicaragua had one of the lowest rates of excess deaths.

A new outreach programme in schools will be testing students' hearing, vision, linguistic alteration, doing dental care, personal hygiene workshops, and vaccinating against COVID-19 for all 1.8 million students throughout the country.

The best health care is free: Susana's story

Susana lives with her family in a remote community in northern Nicaragua. An initial test in a private clinic showed that she apparently had a large ovarian tumour. Becca Renk tells the story of what happened next.

I met Susana when I went with a visiting US medical delegation to her village, the El Porvenir coffee co-op, a two hour walk from the nearest health post making access to health care difficult. At 8:30pm Susana was the last of 89 patients to be seen by the doctors that day. She showed them the ultrasound she had had at a private clinic four months earlier which showed a large ovarian tumour. The doctors explained that she needed to seek specialised care immediately.

"I can't," she told me. "We don't have the money. At the private clinic they said the tests I needed would cost C\$2,000 córdobas [£43]."

"Doña Susana," I explained, "You won't pay anything. You just need to get to the public hospital, come to Managua and let's go together."

In the crowded waiting room, my eyes focus on the feet walking past: unpainted toes in sandals, work boots, pedicures and high heels. I am with Susana in the melting pot that is Managua's Fernando Vélez Paiz Hospital. Although it is a free public hospital, it is not just the poor who come here; it's one of the largest and best-equipped hospitals with a reputation for excellent service – even the wealthy seek care here.

Susana has been given a same day appointment with the gynaecologist who orders an ultrasound and a mammogram. There are 40 women ahead of us, mostly pregnant women, but others for treatment for precancerous lesions. While she is in the examination room

with the gynaecological oncologist, her husband Hilario tells me how worried he's been about Susana.

"I told her, let's sell the pig, let's sell the horse to pay for those tests. We can replace the animals, but we can't replace you." Hilario shakes his head, "She wouldn't let me sell them."

I know why Susana refused: the pig is being fattened for Christmas, but not for their family. That pig represents a large portion of their cash income and will buy food and school supplies. The horse is invaluable as their transport used to haul water and collect provisions; their lives would be so much harder without their animals.

We're surprised when Susana emerges smiling!

"They did an ultrasound and an examination and I don't have any tumour

at all! They told me to come back next year for my checkup."

Later, I ask why the first results were wrong – was the private clinic incompetent or trying to squeeze money out of a poor family desperate to save a loved one? The doctor tells me that while fraud is not uncommon no one can say for sure if the erroneous results were due to negligence or maliciousness. Regardless, Susana and her family have spent four months worrying themselves sick for nothing.

On the way to the bus station Susana and Hilario are buzzing, effusive with their thanks and joking about the long trip back home; their relief is palpable.

So many people suffered during the neoliberal years that society became scarred. Sometimes it still seems too good to be true – clean, modern hospitals with trained medical professionals for free?

Thanks to the Sandinista government's political will to prioritise the poor and its Herculean efforts to modernise and expand the system, the best health care in the country is free. Now families like Susana's are beginning to believe it.

Pregnant women and staff in the Casa Materna in Ciudad Sandino, one of 181 in Nicaragua.



The Revolution in the Right to Education



NSCAG trade union & communications co-ordinator, Louise Richards explains how education in Nicaragua has been transformed from a privatised commodity to a free universal right.

On returning to power in 2007, the Sandinista government immediately restored the right of Nicaraguans to access free and high quality education. Since then Nicaragua's education budget has been increased year on year as a key factor in reducing poverty and promoting economic development.

The new school year began on 23 January 2023 and saw an enrolment record of 1.8 million students. The number of teachers has increased from 42,000 in 2006 to 67,128 in 2022 and the number

of technical schools from 26 to 56. A new government project, in collaboration with the National Technological Institute INATEC, aims to expand municipal trade colleges across the country.

More than 1.2m children receive free school meals, guaranteeing that no child goes hungry. This has contributed to the 68% drop in chronic malnutrition in school age children since 2007. To complement free school meals, the Ministry of Education (MINED) promotes the setting up of gardens in both primary and secondary schools. The purpose of

the gardens is to strengthen the culture of Nicaragua as a largely rural country, to recognise the role of the peasantry, and to motivate children and young people in agricultural production and innovations to maximise the use of land.

Particular efforts have also been made for education in rural and indigenous and afro-descendant communities with an emphasis on cultural rights: respecting their language, culture and way of life.

The government has built new schools, improved the facilities in existing ones and expanded digital access. In addition to more traditional subjects, the arts, culture, sport and the environment are an important part of the school curriculum.

A green schools programme involves students in reforestation campaigns while a specific environmental education programme aims to teach students about the care and sustainable use of natural resources. Students also benefit from a healthy schools programme which incorporates lessons on health care and disease prevention.

MINED has also implemented an integrated strategy to improve education for children with special needs. Continued specialisation of teachers, adapted educational materials, improved school environments and permanent family support providing skills and learning development for their children, combine to create successful learning outcomes for children with special needs.

Sixteen years of Sandinista government have meant dignity, human development, food sovereignty, social inclusion, and respect for individual and collective rights, not least in the field of education.

Teachers are valued in our society, they develop character, talents and human potential and enable children and young people to value themselves and the world around them.

**SALVADOR VANEGAS,
MINISTERIAL ADVISER TO THE
PRESIDENT ON EDUCATION**



Over 1.2 million children are entitled to free school meals prepared collectively by parents with supplies provided by the government. This has led to a 68% drop in childhood malnutrition since 2007.

The Resurgence of Trade Union Rights in Nicaragua

‘Trade union solidarity is a political expression of unity and a willingness to share solutions to challenges and problems. In this way, we learn that the road is not always an easy one, but together we can succeed. Working class unity and identity have no border.’

JOSE ANTONIO ZEPEDA, INTERNATIONAL COORDINATOR, NATIONAL WORKERS FRONT (FNT)

At a time when UK trade unions are fighting for better pay and conditions in the face of a hostile government determined to weaken trade union rights and influence, Nicaraguan trade unions enjoy a valued and respected position in society.

Trade unions play an important role in the country’s political, social and economic life. They are consulted on key developments such as the National Poverty and Human Development Plan 2022-26 and have seats on all government commissions including health, education and race equality. Around a third of the seats in Nicaragua’s National Assembly are occupied by deputies who have their roots in the trade unions.

Yet it wasn’t always this way. From 1990-2006 a series of US-backed neoliberal governments stripped away trade union rights. Health and education were privatised, and two thirds of public sector workers lost their jobs. Unemployment stood at 70% and those who were in work received low wages or found themselves in precarious employment. Strikes to defend workers rights were commonplace and trade union membership plummeted.

On returning to power in 2007, the Sandinista government set about restoring trade union rights. Sixteen years later, workers have seen significant advances and enjoy full trade union rights. The right to collective bargaining, the right to organise and the right to strike are enshrined in the constitution which also includes laws on the right to work, equal pay for equal work, occupational safety, working hours, social benefits and social security.

Salary and minimum wage increases take place each year – the minimum wage increase for 2023 was 10% and the annual wage increase for public sector workers

was 5%. Low paid workers receive an annual solidarity bonus and subsidies for energy and transport.

Levels of unionisation continue to increase, with a particular focus on recruiting women and young people. The Ministry of Labour also carries out regular workplace inspections to monitor working conditions and protect the health and

safety of workers.

Nicaragua’s trade unions have benefited hugely from all these transformations. Unlike in some other countries in Latin America, not a single trade unionist has been oppressed, imprisoned or killed since 2007.

Solidarity with Nicaragua’s trade unions was vital during the neoliberal period as they struggled to survive. However, this remains as important today as the gains over the last 16 years are under threat from a US government determined to oust Nicaragua’s democratically elected government and replace it with one aligned to its own interests.

Nicaraguan workers have no wish to return to the dark days of neoliberalism and continue to defend their country’s sovereignty, right to self-determination and right to live in peace.

UK – Nicaragua Teacher Exchange

Following a 2017 exchange visit sponsored by the then NUT, a second visit took place in July/August 2022 when a group of eleven primary and secondary teachers, (pictured below), visited Nicaragua to meet with their counterparts, all teachers of English as a second language. Sponsored by the National Education Union (NEU) the visit

focussed on discussions and methodology around the teaching of a second language through workshops and practical sessions. They stayed in the homes of members of the Nicaraguan teachers’ union ANDEN and therefore also learned about Nicaraguan culture and their way of life. The programme was organised and hosted by the NEU’s sister union ANDEN, with the support of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education MINED.



PEASANT FEMINISM

Changing relationships between people & nature

Since its inception in 1993, La Via Campesina (LVC), a global movement of small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples, has been developing and putting into practice peasant feminism that is rooted in the life experiences of rural women and recognises that all life forms are interconnected.

Small scale farmers and workers in rural areas have traditionally faced multiple interconnected forms of exploitation, exclusion, poverty, displacement, and invisibility.

All these forms of violence, that have particularly impacted women, have been exacerbated by the systemic violence of neoliberalism: the concentration of land ownership and resources in the hands of corporations, the unsustainable exploitation of people and the environment.

Peasant feminism fully recognises the overlap with other forms of more urban based feminism such as the struggle for gender equality and the elimination of all forms of gender based violence. But it also encompasses food sovereignty, access to land, the protection of biodiversity, reclaiming ancestral practices, and building new relationships among human beings. It is also crucial in transforming patriarchal, capitalist social and economic structures.

Peasant feminism: the Nicaraguan example

'In 45 years of the organisation of the ATC (Rural Workers' Association) and the Revolution, the ills of illiteracy have been left behind, extreme poverty and poverty have been reduced, the right to land and agroecology has been vindicated, and peasant production has been dignified.' Statement on the celebration of the ATC's 45th anniversary, 2023

‘We must learn from the climate crisis and pandemic and invest in building local, resilient, diverse food systems.’

LA VIA CAMPESINA

- The ATC, one of the founding members of the LVC, works with its 47,000 members and in defence of employment rights of rural workers and in strengthening the struggles for political, economic, social and climate justice in rural areas.

- Since the early 1980s, the ATC women's movement MMC, has represented the interests of rural women.

- The ATC has four training centres where they run courses for both women and men that include gender relations and eliminating gender based violence. These programmes also foster women's leadership in rural movements; in the ATC itself the majority of both national and departmental leaders are women.

- One of these centres, the Latin America Agroecology Institute Ixim Ulew (IALA), offers agroecology, food sovereignty and political organising training for students from LVC organisations from across Central America and the Caribbean. Part of this training focuses on dismantling patriarchal structures and transformation to a model that builds shared responsibilities between women and men, and boosts food production that protects

‘The task we have is to recover the land and our identity as young campesinxs, to have our own land to grow food in a holistic, diversified way.’

IALA GRADUATE
MIGDALIA CRUZ
ATC JINOTEGA

people and the planet.

- The ATC works directly with peasant communities organised into co-operatives and associations accompanying their work, providing technical training and facilitating their links with government training programmes.

- Unlike almost all other countries, the ATC and its members function within the context of a government that has put in place measures responding to rural needs, particularly of those of rural women. These include agrarian reform and land titles, technical training and marketing, rural roads and electrification, and free health care and education. Zero hunger and low interest credit programmes, rural health centres and mobile clinics particularly impact the lives of rural women. [SEE PAGE 3]

Maize is one of Nicaragua's staple crops and forms a central part of the country's cultural traditions



PEASANT FEMINISM IN PRACTICE

The Fundación Entre Mujeres (FEM), Esteli



Members of FEM taking soil samples

FEM is a member organisation of the ATC with 3,000 peasant women living in 17 communities in the department of Esteli working together to improve their lives and those of their families and communities.

In an online event about women in rural areas, *FEM representative Cristian Guzman described how her campesina grandmother is one of the strongest influences in her life. Cristian sees herself building on the legacy and wisdom of struggles of generations of rural women epitomised by her grandmother's example.

For FEM one key priority is eliminating stereotypes such as those of perceptions that people from rural areas are backward and uneducated. Overcoming such perceptions is key to recovering the identity of the countryside and those who live there as something positive.

This is essential to encouraging people to identify with the countryside as a place to stay and enjoy based on collective effort and community values thereby counteracting the mindset that leads to a flight to cities or elsewhere.

For the FEM, the first step in building peasant feminism is raising awareness and consciousness and political education on the roots of inequality, class, and gender.

'Without consciousness and awareness raising there will be no change.'

Cristian went on to explain the importance of recognising that women in rural and urban areas have been impacted differently by colonialism. For all women, the common issues are the struggle for gender equality and against gender related violence. But for peasant feminists the struggle is also about their relationship with the environment: seeds, land, water, food, life in all its forms. For example, setting up our own seed banks fundamental, 'if we lose control of seeds, we lose control of life itself.'

FEM's areas of work:

AGROECOLOGY Eight women's agroecology co-operatives ensure healthy food for their families and communities and to sell locally. These include maize and beans, eggs, chicken, pork, dairy, fruit, vegetables, herbs, coffee, and honey, tea, jelly, and hibiscus wine. FEM farmers use no pesticides, chemical fertilisers, or seeds. This is all part of taking a long term

perspective on the health of the land and food, sustainable farming practices that minimise green house gases and help to cool the planet.

BANKS OF CAREFULLY SELECTED RESILIENT SEEDS are made available to FEM members with a special reserve retained for climate crisis related disasters such as hurricanes and droughts. 'Sovereignty over our bodies, our rights, and our seeds.'

TRAINING workshops, forums, networking, and campaigns on topics such as the struggle against violence; rural issues from a generational and gender perspective; building awareness of land and housing rights for women; and forming a network of young women.

CREDIT FUNDS to enable women to access land and technical support for sustainable agriculture.

INFLUENCING LOCAL AND NATIONAL POLITICS through meetings with officials to demand the fulfillment of women's rights, and public promotion of FEM's perspective as peasant feminists.

NETWORKS OF AGROECOLOGICAL PROMOTERS and communicators; a mobile health clinic; and a youth radio programme that educates the public in setting up rural and urban backyard gardens.

A MEN'S GROUP CALLED MIYOTL organises workshops on new masculinities. Faced with ridicule in a machista society, a member of the group responded, "I am not gay, but I have learned that I can be friends with men and even love them." When asked whether gay men would be accepted into the group, he answered, "Why wouldn't they be? We practice agroecology and embrace biological diversity. Why would we not embrace diversity among human beings?"

* Cristian Guzman spoke at an online event entitled 'Peasant Feminism, the seeds of Revolution' organised by Friends of the ATC, part of an annual Ben Linder Solidarity School. [See www.friendsatc.org](http://www.friendsatc.org)

The journey of Nicaraguan Fairtrade coffee grower Erika Lanzas



Erika Lanzas with children at the Oldfield School, Bath

Erika Lanzas from the Co-operative Union SOPPEXCCA, is an organic Fairtrade coffee grower, a member of a co-operative, a mother and grandmother and an entrepreneur. In addition to coffee Erika also grows vegetables and fruit for family consumption and to sell locally.

On her first trip outside Nicaragua Erika visited London and Bristol as a guest of the Bristol Link with Nicaragua and NSC from 11-27 April.

Generations of her family have lived in the small rural community of El Salto where people earn their livelihood from agriculture: some have small holdings where they grow maize and beans, some farm as individual families, others are members of co-operatives.

Many don't own enough land to make a decent living so supplement their income by working as labourers on large plantations or spend part of the year working in precarious circumstances in Costa Rica.

Erika described the tough life she experienced as a child especially after her father left the family when she was eleven. This meant that she was only able to go to school for three years but then her role was confined to helping her mother in the house.

The life she now leads is in great contrast to the situation she faced when she was young. She is now a single mother living with four of her children and grandchildren and owns a hectare of land called La Libertad.

Since 2012 Erika has been a member of SOPPEXCCA and her local 19 person co-operative called Arlen Siu, named after a Sandinista singer/songwriter who died in 1975 at the age of 20 in the insurrection that led to the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship.

Erika described with pride the advantages of being in a Co-op: a greater sense of solidarity and sharing, developing ways in which stereotypes, roles and barriers can be broken down,

“ Fairtrade helps us to achieve our goals: diversification of production, promotion of gender equality including land and credit for our members especially women, production of high-quality shade grown coffee, environmental protection; and fully incorporating young people into all our work. ”

**FATIMA ISMAEL,
GENERAL MANAGER
SOPPEXCCA**

gender training for both women and men, and taking decisions about projects that the Co-op can undertake together.

As with farmers globally, the escalating climate crisis has brought severe challenges: more frequent hurricanes and periods of intense rain and wind, erratic temperatures, droughts and floods. This has meant roads, bridges and crops washed away; rising temperatures bring an increase in crop diseases. All these factors make it difficult to control the quality and quantity of coffee.

SOPPEXCCA offers members training in mitigating and adapting to the crisis. This includes how to detect disease well in advance, and good farming practices such as constant monitoring. Erika stressed the importance of making sure that everything they do helps to conserve biodiversity.

Since being a member of SOPPEXCCA and her coffee being sold through Fairtrade, the lives of Erika, her family and community have seen substantial improvements. They have been able to buy a new roof for their house, replacing one that constantly leaked, and to build an inside toilet replacing a latrine in the yard. Erika has also been able to buy a wet processing mill for de-pulping coffee which gives her greater control over the quality of her coffee.

During her visit to London and Bristol Link with Nicaragua (BLINC) Erika visited farmers markets, a Transition Towns event, schools, colleges, businesses, community organisations and farms, to share her experience of what difference Fairtrade makes, and how her family and community farm in a way that protects biodiversity and provides them with an income.

Erika is the 17th female Fairtrade producer that BLINC has brought to Bristol from Nicaragua including ten from SOPPEXCCA. With support from the NSC, Bristol and South Glos Fairtrade networks and the University of Bath, BLINC has impacted on over 20,000 local children through this initiative.

For a copy of the BLINC Fairtrade Toolkit:

📄 <https://bristolnicaragua.wordpress.com/2022/01/07/bristol-fairtrade-toolkit/>

SOPPEXCCA website 🌐 www.soppexcca.org.ni

Mayoya: a celebration of life, fertility, and hope for the coming harvest

Not long after the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the part of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua called Mosquita, along came Africans, (escaped slaves from the Caribbean,) the British, the Dutch, the Germans, the Spanish and North Americans.

All these groups contributed to the fusion that has become Caribbean May Pole celebrations. Is it of Celtic, ancient Egyptian or Germanic origin? 'The only thing that we can say for certain,' according to social historian Donovan Brautigam, 'is that May Pole has a universal origin.'

The flora, the weather, and the multiple customs of the Caribbean Coast merged creating a whole new take on an age-old celebration.

The original Maypole of the Caribbean carries rhythms based on instruments such as a coconut grater, donkey jawbone, tortoiseshell, washing tub, hand drums, and maracas, guitar, banjo, accordion and violin. The traditional genre of Maypole music is calypso and soca, popular in the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean.

Some traditional songs from Nicaragua are Sing Simon Sing My Love, Mayaya

Lost His Key, Launch Turn Over, Come Down Breda Willy, among others. Many of the Maypole songs are testimonials and denunciations of injustices that occurred in the communities of the Nicaraguan Caribbean at a particular time. Other songs are of English origin such as 'London Bridge is falling down' and 'Doing the Lambeth walk'.

"Judith Drowned": the song about spreading fake news

There are many people who speak and announce without check if the facts are real. The thing is that they announced that Judith had drowned and it turns out she was alive in her bed at home. In the song the soloist is questioning the legitimacy of the fake news. But the chorus keeps insisting, "Somebadi se Judith drowned."

CHORUS: Judith drowned,

Judith drowned

Somebadi se Judith drowned

SOLOIST: Judith no drowned Judith da bed

CHORUS: Somebadi se Judith drowned

SOLOIST: Ho se Judith drowned?

CHORUS: Somebadi se Judith drowned

SOLOIST: Where were you when Judith drowned

CHORUS: Somebadi se Judith drowned...

Carlos Rigby:
poet singer, writer, storyteller



Carlos Rigby, who died in 2017, was an Afro-Caribbean poet from the black Creole community of Pearl Lagoon. He wrote in Creole and standard English as well as in Spanish but his poems and writings are intertwined with invented words and tongue twisters reflecting the sounds and concepts of the Caribbean oral story telling tradition.

Excerpt from 'If I were May' by Carlos Rigby:

in the middle of the May Pole wheel
with my rain dance
and my solitude
a dance for the first rains of spring
and in the end
it is through the new green
that the voice of the people is heard
yelling from high atop the May Pole:
May, oh May, most faithful month.



Today Mayo Ya is an intercultural celebration of fertility, life, the coming rains bringing together all the peoples of the Caribbean: Meskito, Garifuna, Creole, Rama, Mestizo and Afro- descendant peoples in events that incorporate music, dance, food, art, and craft.

Mayo Ya: Maypole belongs to everyone

Until 1979 Palo de Mayo was mainly celebrated by black Creole communities in Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, Corn Island and Bragman's Bluff in Bilwi. But as part of the government's Caribbean Coast autonomy process after the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution in 1979, the celebrations also took the name Mayo Ya (the goddess of rain) a celebration for all ethnic groups of the Caribbean: May Pole belongs to everyone.

Further information including a link to an excellent film about Carlos Rigby's life entitled 'Antologia de Carlos Rigby' www.antologiacarlrigby.com

A day in the life of an NSC building brigade

1984

The first NSC brigade spent four months working on a school building project, part of the Sandinista government's rural education programme.

Corazon *Magico* (Magic Heart), the latest hit in the Nicaraguan charts, crackles forth from Radio Sandino followed by a government jingle about increasing cotton production.

It's 5am and all life begins to stir in the community of Santa Paula in the middle of a vast expanse of cotton fields where we are staying.

Candida, the mother of the family shouts 'Levantate, levantate,' to 11-year-old Gregorio and seven-year-old Ediberto. Six days a week they go off to pick the cotton: their wages are a vital supplement to the family's meagre income.

Candida, who has little patience with unreliable men, berates Santi, an older man who lives in the house. He forgot to pick up our rations of beans, rice, maize and sugar from the distribution centre yesterday, unforgivable in Candida's eyes.

As it starts to get light at 5.30am, the tractor and trailer arrive to take the workers off to pick cotton. It's the hottest part of the dry season and the scorched, treeless plain is like a giant furnace. The workers are well protected against the spiky, scratchy cotton, sprayed with defoliant to make picking easier; it's tough, exhausting, dusty work.

Meanwhile, our eight-person brigade

together with our Nicaraguan supervisor continues our work building a school. Julian is seen disappearing into a field with a spade and some balls of cotton – OK as a toilet paper substitute – except if you forget to remove the seeds!

After three month's work the school is beginning to look more like a building and less like a satellite tracking station. At 9.00am we have a welcome break for coffee, grapefruit, and mangos. We chat with the Nicaraguans, coining adaptations of Nicaraguan and English proverbs: a garobo (iguana) in the hand is worth two in the tree is one of the better ones.

There follows a long discussion about water for mixing the cement. There is an acute shortage of fuel and spare parts because of US sanctions, so no tractor and trailer are available to get water from the river. Constant invention is a necessity. We half fill a barrel of water from a well, put it on some planks on a wheelbarrow... and hold our breath.

By this time the wind is blowing up fine powdery dust with occasional whirlwinds sending plumes of topsoil into the air. We clean the cement out of the wheelbarrow, place a mattress and a six month old baby on it....and Carlos goes off happily for his daily wheelbarrow ride.

Later, we return to our Nicaraguan families where the children are drawing water from the well, collecting firewood, and dragging the reluctant pig to its sleeping place in the kitchen. One of their favourite tasks is topping up bottles of diesel and lighting the rag stuffed into the bottle. These *bombas* are the family's only source of light.

Towards sunset the children gather for a game of baseball using a small branch from a tree and an old sock stuffed with cotton. They manoeuvre around a caterpillar tractor that ground to a halt a couple of years ago and has not moved since, another victim of the US war on Nicaragua.

After a supper of beans, rice, boiled bananas and iguana, the sun quickly goes down and we all sit outside in the coolness and tranquillity of the evening, chatting, playing with the children, spotting stars and satellites in the cloudless sky, and discussing the endless suffering caused by the brutal, senseless war.



During the time the brigade was in Nicaragua the Sandinistas won free and fair elections. Despite this, the full force of the Reagan administration senseless military, economic, and political aggression continued. However morally, ethically and legally reprehensible, for Reagan the ends justified the means, the overthrow of the democratically elected Sandinista government. In 1986 Nicaragua's war on Nicaragua was declared illegal by the International Court of Justice, a verdict the US refused to accept.