

Working in Nicaragua between 1986 and 2001

People have many reasons for thinking of going to do some kind of development work overseas. Its pretty much a step into the unknown for almost everyone who does. So it pays to have a reasonably clear idea of what you want and what you hope to achieve before taking a decision that is difficult to change at journeys end.

I was fortunate when I first decided to go to Nicaragua in 1986 to have had clear ideological reasons for going, as well as a strong family background of voluntary community service. My family supported what I wanted to do, which didn't seem important at the time but was a source of strength and support later. And I had a strong commitment to peace and justice based on a class analysis of international economic relations, which I have seen no reason to change much in the last 15 years.

So emotionally and psychologically I felt ready for the shock of immersion in a foreign culture and language. This was important because that first journey was self-financed and I only had the benefit of a couple of weeks of company from a fellow solidarity worker, Christine Anderson from Edinburgh, by way of acculturation. Christine helped me greatly with basic Nicaraguan Spanish and helped me avoid some of the worst gaffes typically made by metropolitan foreigners not used to the often rather formal and very dignified etiquette of a small rural Nicaraguan town.

After a couple of weeks I found myself working alone in a school yard under the scrutiny of a couple of hundred children and their teachers. They observed this odd, curly-haired, blond, cat-eyed gringo swinging a pick to dig footings for a new classroom building. They listened, mostly politely, to the gringos extraordinary tormenting of the Spanish language.

Most importantly from my point of view, they fed me and arranged for me to stay with a local family. Soon I was joined by a couple of other foreigners, Steve and Billy. We spent three months problem solving with our hosts finding scarce materials, organising transport, coping with unprecedented health problems, negotiating the maze of local community politics. In the end, we made a pretty good job of building a couple of classrooms on a diet of rice and beans and sometimes just beans.

The town was called Cardenas, located on the southern shore of Lake Nicaragua. The school was named after a hero of the 1979 liberation war, Rene Barahona. From the school yard you could see two huge volcanoes rise out of the lake, almost always with an aureole of cloud wisping around their summits. All this the natural beauty, the dignity of local people, the litany of problems resolved - was a pretty common experience for foreign workers helping with building projects or the coffee harvest.

We learnt a lot of Nicaraguan Spanish and a great deal about human relations. We were made welcome by people who had nothing, hardly even enough to eat. We learned what their lives were like and compared what we came to know with what mass produced "information" led people to believe in our systematically misinformed home countries.

That initial six-month visit to Nicaragua remains to me a source of strength and emotional support because it confirmed to me that peace and justice are not abstract ideas to be accepted breezily as part of the throwaway jargon of politics and institutional public relations. Nor did it lend lustre to the seductive theorising of post-modernity, or the "new information age" or the absurd claims that the end of the Cold War has ushered in a New World Order.

Returning to work in Nicaragua in 1995, that initial experience served as a benchmark for the community work to which I was assigned. Good community development work depends on healthy human relationships. Those relationships in their turn rely on a more or less consistent commitment to honesty and sensitivity, on both sides.

So I think knowing what you want and committing yourself to do your best in terms of both work and human relationships is important to work out some time before you get on the plane. The nitty-gritty of your assignment (accommodation, handling money, personal security, medical care, work profile) is important too, but pretty irrelevant really if you find yourself thinking "what on earth have I done?" as you gaze with an insincere smile at your new colleagues on your first day of work.

A defining and consistent feature of development work in my experience in Nicaragua has been the superficial commitment and general insincerity of most aid and development institutions. Anyone going to work overseas should not set out with high

expectations of the managers and bureaucrats who administer development programmes. That should surprise no one with any life experience in the general economy.

One of the joys of my assignments for agencies in Nicaragua has been that they couldn't really care less what you do so long as you don't land them with any extra work. The freedom this gives a resourceful individual to develop interesting and worthwhile community programs is worth any intermittent frustrations caused by someone back in the regional office suddenly waking up and wanting to know what you mean by doing X or Y.

The disadvantage of that lackadaisical, laissez-faire approach is that there is no institutional commitment to provide continuing support for the work you may have got under way by the time your assignment ends. But in any case, policies change under Kafkaesque constraints imposed from so high up the hierarchy that promises you may have wheedled from a Janus-like field representative (looking you in the face and looking back over their shoulder to head office at the same time) may well prove as valuable as an Enron share certificate.

In any case, development is, or should be, focused on the people and communities we work with. It is they who should provide the measure of the success or otherwise of our work together. In Nicaragua, despite all the institutional nonsense of the development agency circus, I believe my colleagues gave me something more than just convictions to have the courage of. I think we showed that by working together we can build equitable relationships and decent sustainable living standards despite the inherent and age-old injustice of current international relations between rich and poor.

Since my assignment with ended in 2000 I have been fortunate enough to work as part of a team of individuals, with help from two private trusts, supporting a team of Nicaraguan community workers and teachers. Together they have set up a local non-profit foundation and a cooperative.

The foundation bought land and put in infrastructure for classrooms, offices, a mechanical workshop, a dispensary and a garden for environmental and agricultural initiatives. The foundation also serves to channel funding for local projects to the cooperative.

The cooperative implements adult education courses for over 100 local women and health outreach work in many local rural communities. Until the end of 2001 it also delivered agricultural and environmental services to 90 local farmers and their families. These initiatives are coordinated with the relevant government ministries and the local municipal authority.

A cycle pump was developed by the project team. A bike works a rope pump that can irrigate up to an acre of land using simple drip irrigation techniques

The most important element for me has been the attempt to strike a balance between non-profit characteristics that permit a reasonably secure level of core subsidy for social programs balanced by an attempt at sustainability through the more economically viable activities of the cooperative.

The operational overheads for running these programs are tiny when compared with government and agency costs less than 10% of an annual budget of US\$50,000. Yet those programs benefit directly well over 500 people less than US\$100 per person per year.

For most people the chance of being part of this kind of work changes them. It puts other considerations in perspective and enhances awareness of other peoples lives. Whatever course people take once their time working in development overseas is over, almost all of us find that what we have learned about ourselves and others makes us more resourceful and capable individuals than we were before (and thats important, if only because coming back home can be a worse culture shock than leaving it).