

Women in Solidarity for Development”

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Introduction

The municipality of San Ramon, Nicaragua, located 90 miles north east of Managua in the Matagalpa region, is a mountainous area. Of the 30,000 inhabitants, 26,000 live in remote hamlets. The people live largely by cultivating cash crops such as coffee, corn, and beans; by raising cattle; and by practicing subsistence agriculture. Unemployment and malnutrition are widespread; only 20% of school-aged children attend school. Machismo is prevalent and men frequently take up with many women, especially if they must migrate to find agricultural work for large landowners in order to survive. Unfortunately, many abandon their wives and children. Young, single mothers head the vast majority of families, and too often these women must to migrate to the city to find work, living in urban slums and furthering the breakup of rural families.

I spent the fall of 2006 in San Ramon and worked with a community-based, registered non-governmental organization, the Centro Promocional Cristiano, which impressed me with its effectiveness in developing sustainable microbusinesses, such as agriculture and natural medicine cooperatives, especially for women. They have nearly 20 years of experience and a widely developed network throughout the region. I worked collaboratively with Rosario Gonzalez, my former supervisor, to develop a realistic project for this summer that would address fair and sustainable employment opportunities for a group of unemployed single mothers.

Who

I propose to work with the Centro Promocional Cristiano; my main contact there would be Rosario Gonzalez, the center's director. For this project, we would partner with 40 women, mostly single heads of household, from the rural hamlets of La Amancia and El Plomo, near San Ramon. I have met many of these women and visited their communities. Most of them are young, single mothers who range in age from 16 to 30; all are creative, resourceful, and hardworking and would welcome the project. Around 250 extended family members would also benefit by the raised income that would come from this project. We would also work with two sewing instructors. We have already identified one, Marfa Arista, who is more than willing to work on the project with us.

What and How

The project would develop sewing businesses in the two communities of La Amancia and El Plomo, in order to generate income for the 40 women and their families. Currently, no such business exists. The women would then sell the clothes they make in their communities, in neighboring communities, in the nearby town of San Ramon, and most lucratively, to tourists (there is a growing eco-tourism industry in the region). This will provide much-needed income to these predominantly young, single mothers and their families, as well as prevents the women from having to migrate to far-flung urban slums. After the

summer, the Centro Promocional Cristiano will continue to visit the women monthly to facilitate planning meetings and offer assistance as needed for nine more months, with the idea that after a year the project would be completely self-sufficient, and the women will be generating steady income for themselves, buying their own materials, and managing all aspects of the business.

To help get this project started, Mrs. Gonzalez, Mrs. Arista and I will travel to La Amancia and El Plomo to assist with sewing workshops which will focus on teaching women to make shirts, pants, and traditional outfits, and to repair and embroider. The sewing teachers will be in charge of the actual sewing instruction, while Mrs. Gonzalez and I will teach about resource administration, basic business skills and basic math.

Organizational Capacity

The entire staff and Mrs. Gonzalez in particular are diligent, organized, and fast-acting. They have organized community health networks and greatly improved sanitation and reduced malnutrition throughout the San Ramon area through workshops and leadership training. In addition, they have experience with working with women to organize microbusinesses, including community gardens and natural medicine pharmacies. When I worked with the staff in the fall of 2006 to design a plan, fundraise, and budget for a medical clinic, I witnessed their efficacy firsthand. As soon as the funds arrived, they immediately set to work, and built a sturdy and functioning clinic in less than two months.

Expected Outcomes

- 40 women from La Amancia and El Plomo will know how to make clothes and manage basic finances. With the materials we will have given them, they will have started their own sustainable business, by which they will support their families, which include about 250 indirect beneficiaries of the project.
- These women will not have to migrate to the urban slums outside of Matagalpa or Managua. Economic stability, in turn, promotes the stability of the family, which is vital to peace in any country.
- With ten pedal sewing machines strategically located in specific community centers, the Centro Promocional Cristiano will be able to continue training more young women. As the businesses become more self-sufficient, the women will be able to train others in sewing and embroidery. This is a realistic expectation based on experience; several of the women are involved in the organization's community health program and have taken the initiative to run workshops in their communities. With training and resources, natural leadership and collaboration emerge.
- A goal of this project is to assist women with the skills and resources to gain more economic power. In addition to helping their family survive and stay together, these women will learn a skill and earn an income with dignity, resulting in their increased self-worth and greater control over their lives. In this way, the project contributes to the role of women as active agents of positive change and development in the community.