

## Act today ... and not tomorrow nor "The Day After Tomorrow"

### Introduction

I am Elba Rivera Urbina, the daughter of small farmers or *campesinos*, which in my country of origin, Nicaragua, means living in remote areas, with little infrastructure, scarce access to education and health services, and living under the threat of many external impacts.

When I was 18 years old, a national literacy campaign rescued me from the fate usually reserved for those such as myself: to be illiterate, have many children and live a severely restricted and stagnant existence in the very remote countryside, a world I would be **unable to change**. A world where it is necessary to fight for change in order to ensure the opportunity to live decent lives.

The economic development models prevailing in Nicaragua have bogged us down in a quagmire of **dependency, poverty and hopelessness**. Nicaragua is an almost exclusively agrarian country, traditionally bound to single-cropping and the use of agrochemicals. A very small segment of the population owns large tracts of land, on which **extensive cattle-ranching** for beef export purposes takes place.

It used to be the case that staple foods production (mainly maize and beans) was such that Nicaraguans were fond of boasting that their country was “the granary of Central America”. Currently there is talk about **cattle-ranching** becoming the most important economic commodity, but the truth is that this growth was achieved at the expense of the environment, through deforestation, and it is only profitable because **cattle-ranchers don't pay for social and environmental consequences of their activity**.

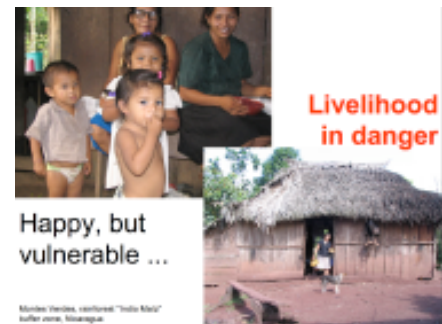
Single-cropping in certain areas of staple foods and tubers, as well as cattle-ranching, are dominant in the humid tropics, where I come from, and where cattle-ranching is as damaging and deadly as an epidemic.

Nicaragua is being converted into yellow pastures and steppes - Nicar**Agua**, the land of waters (*agua* means ‘water’ in Spanish) has lost more than half of its rivers, streams and springs, and what water is left has been contaminated by cattle-ranching and an agricultural model based on the so-called “green revolution”.

As an ecological and environmentally conscious small farmer, I share the situation that for decades has been the same for a lot of small agricultural producers in Nicaragua, and of women in particular.

Thus this past year **we had a very poor harvest** of maize and beans, which are fundamental because they are the main part of the Nicaraguan diet. The farmers that sowed during the normal planting season harvested nothing, because it didn't rain when it should have. Only a few ended up harvesting a little bit, which is why many others turned to **stealing** from the fields and homes of others the grains they needed to feed their families.

The tradition of slash-and-burn, followed by the sowing of pastures and single-cropping in a country whose real potential lies in agro-forestry has impoverished the soils, drastically reduced plant cover, dried up water sources and hopelessly impoverished small farmers.



## The Millennium Development Goals are here!

Given the situation I have described above, the arrival of the **Millennium Development Goals (MDG)** were like a dream come true and a welcome promise. These are eight beautiful and very necessary objectives, intended to reduce and even eradicate poverty and injustice.

However, only a few years after these were announced, the **world economic crisis** came upon us - a crisis made in the North, taking us by surprise, and once again we suffered yet another external event leading to paralysis. The new situation has led to cutbacks in the percentage of aid earmarked for poor countries by rich ones, the MDG **promise** of 0.7% of GDP, and a number of other promises of bilateral aid made by the G8 and other industrialised nations. But quite to the contrary, and precisely due to the crisis, they **should help us even more**, because our development projects and even goals already met are now endangered, as the crisis affects the economies of the South even more severely than those of the North.

The 189 countries that committed themselves to meet the Millennium Development Goals did so because they realized that it is necessary to create more just, more sustainable and more humane societies.

It is urgent to design a plan by which to rescue the MDGs. It is urgent because now almost ten years have gone by, ten of the original fifteen-year time frame. Therefore civil society, we the W8, together with Oxfam International, Oxfam Quebec and the other Oxfam chapters are exerting pressure on the European Union, the G8 and the UN to come up with a MDG rescue plan in the course of the year 2010. We would like to **remind those in charge of calculations**, and those that authorize the cutbacks, that erase and forget their agreements, we would like to remind them that every Dollar or Euro less means that more families will not have food to eat, or may have to watch on as their loved ones, families and neighbours, **starve or die of curable diseases**. To increase solidarity means **to save more lives**, to reduce solidarity means **to cut lives short**. We women in the W8 group can provide lists with names and surnames of small farmers with no future in Bangladesh, a list of rivers that will dry up in Nicaragua, a list of girls in Mali who will not be able to attend school, a list of women in Malawi whose babies will **die** because of a recalculation made at a desk in Brussels or Toronto.

The illiteracy rate in Nicaragua is still too high, and we are the country with **the worst education quality in the Americas**, essentially because the state does not invest enough in it. Politicians are immersed in their struggles over quotas of power, pre-electoral campaigns, and in general busy with politicking of no interest to the population, important only to themselves and their parties. These people too must rise to **the enormous challenge implicit in education** with a human quality.

## Climate change and the economic crisis, the straws that breaks the camel's back

To this already vulnerable condition, as we attempt to manage our situation with our own efforts and the assistance provided from abroad, must be added not only the world economic crisis I mentioned earlier, but also **climate change**. Small farmer families were **not prepared** for these two catastrophes, nor are they in the capacity to survive them. If those with the knowledge



and power to do so fail to change the economic model and do not channel resources to the poor, to small farmers, in order to help them to adapt to climate change, this rural culture could disappear entirely. There will be a **great exodus to the cities**, a migration the proportions of which have not been seen before in history. People will migrate to the cities, or to other countries, such as Costa Rica, Spain, the United States and others. People will not die with their arms crossed, they are going to seek paths and ways to survive elsewhere.

To us, climate change means that Nicaragua is in danger of desertification, of what we call “africanization”. To sum up, climate change

- ... affects our **harvests**;
- ... impoverishes our **soils**;
- ... dries our **rivers**;
- ... **floods** our crops;
- ... brings us **hunger** and malnutrition;
- ... extinguishes our rich and unique **biodiversity**, our flora and fauna;
- ... endangers our islands, the habitat of many **indigenous communities** in Nicaragua;
- ... brings more **disease**; and
- ... **traps us** in a situation over which we have no control.

## Viable solutions

There is no time to lament or give in to paralysis. Rather, we must make demands and we must act.

The small farmer and indigenous populations are the **guardians and guarantors** of a sustainable future. But climate change has rendered their traditional abilities and knowledge useless, **their lives unstable, their future bleak**. In their despair, the only thing they know for sure is that “The weather has gone crazy!”



Everywhere in the world there is talk about mitigating the effects of climate change, and I daresay that **we have many solutions** to these challenges, but it is necessary to convert these to public policies. We, the ecological producers living in the humid tropics have a few simple but effective proposals, as follows:

- to concentrate attention on **family farms**, on production by small farmers, men and women alike;
- to modernize the ways of production using the ideas and consequent practice of **ecology and sustainability**;
- to prioritize **trees** as the guarantors of soils, water and **climate**;
- to promote ecological agroforestry: small farmers can grow a large variety of crops under the **productive forests** modality; and
- to **reforest around water sources** (springs, lagoons, streams), using timber and fruit species or natural regrowth.

In 26 years of working with organic and ecological agriculture in Nicaragua, I know for a fact that this idea is viable and sustainable over the long run.

This is the case because these practices help to recover ...

*Millenium Summit Montréal 2010*

- ... biodiversity;
- ... water sources;

In addition, they

- rescue families from misery, allowing them to lead decent lives;
- improve family diets;
- make it unnecessary to sell farms and migrate;
- empower women as partners, mothers and community leaders;

This way of planting and harvesting

- improves small farmer family income;
- allows mestizo and indigenous communities to recover water sources and trees, from which they get fuel wood for cooking and heating, as well as timber with which to build houses and dugout canoes;
- contributes to the recovery of soils, which are at the foundation of rural life and culture;

*Speech by Elba Rivera, W8, Nicaragua*

- ... soil fertility; and
- ... family diets.

- lend local agribusinesses viability;
- add value to agricultural products; and
- render rural populations more independent.

- brings the forests and rivers back to life, and restores biodiversity; and
- lends me certainty that the weather will recover its sanity! Because hundreds of millions more trees would sequester millions of tons of carbon dioxide, and by not using agrochemicals organic soils would also retain large amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>.

## Change can only be achieved through education

The “model” described in the foregoing is simple and very effective, because it includes not only crop diversity and yard animal components, but also an educational and training module that is even more important, because it is through **education** that changes in attitudes, customs and mentalities are achieved.

It is only through education that little by little the **destructive habits** that damage soils may be changed, or the idea displaced that women can only fill traditional roles. Education provides the channels by which people discover and develop their potential. And education also produces persons who are **analytical, critical, autonomous and thoughtful**, able to protect themselves from the manipulation and false prophets of short-term, unsustainable and downright wrong development strategies.

As a **pedagogue and teacher of campesino origin** I have worked most of my life with children, adolescents, youths and adults who live in a rural setting in the wet tropical zone of Nicaragua. And I have worked for our education system to expand into **more and better quality education**, carrying out advocacy with politicians, members of the National Assembly (our parliament), the communications media and parents. Our issues are social responsibility, world climate, water and soils as mile stones to our future and the livelihoods of future generations.

## Preparing the future

Over time, Nicaragua has received many donations - and many donors ask themselves why there has been so little progress! This is a question the answer to which points the finger more at donors than at beneficiaries. Since many donors have designed projects from their desks, and have frequently delivered their aid to the wrong people, to friends and protégés, they have failed to invest in long-term projects, and have not invested in education, which is key to achieving change in people. Those who lack an education will continue to see things on a short-term basis, and will remain unable to value the assistance they receive or understand the intention behind the aid.



As pioneers in ecological agriculture and sustainable rural development in Nicaragua, we have achieved much over the past 26 years, but still the destructive activities outweigh ours by far, and its forces are far more powerful. Together we must make an impact! This is possible, desirable and urgent - but it needs money!

The day on which world leaders agreed to the Millennium Development Goals, they accepted that it is not possible for a few to live in comfortable wealth, while **the vast majority suffers** as they struggle merely to survive. These leaders know that these majorities will become an inconvenient and disagreeable nightmare. The rich place steel bars on the doors and windows of their homes, and **live like in a jail**, with guards and electronic security systems, in an effort to avoid **having their belongings stolen** from them. **Rich countries close their borders** as hermetically as possible, in order to keep economic refugees out. But they will not be allowed rest until they build more just economies and societies. **It is not acceptable how they allow millions of impoverished poor people to die all over the world.** In Leviticus 25, 35, it is written: “And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him; yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee.”

It is **urgent that a MDG rescue plan be drawn up.** There are many good proposals and viable ideas. And this is just the right time to show some human intelligence and find sources to finance the MDGs and thus meet the already agreed commitments, while seeking other sources of financing to cover the emergency caused by the world economic crisis and the global climate catastrophe that are already wreaking havoc among millions of persons and vulnerable soils.

It is further necessary to ensure these efforts have an impact by **creating legal instruments** that make it possible to **demand** these promises be met, **to make the aid effective**, and to **facilitate the work of civil society** in terms of ensuring oversight, control and the transparent use of resources by our governments, as well as the quality of the international cooperation we may receive.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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