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Evaluation of the Public Support to the Norwegian NGOs Working in Nicaragua 1994–1999



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Evaluation of the Public Support to the Norwegian NGOs Working in Nicaragua 1994–1999

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Abbreviations

AIMDESC	Asociación Indígena de Matagalpa para el Desarrollo Económico, Social y Cultural
AECI	Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional
AMC	Acción Médica Cristiana
AMUNIC	Asociación de Municipios de Nicaragua
ANDEN	Asociación Nacional de Educadores de Nicaragua
ATC	Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo
BID	Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo
BN	Norsk Misjonsråds Bistandsnemd (The Council of Norwegian Mission, Development Aid)
DCS	Department for Civil Society
CB	Capacity Building
CDC	Centro de Derechos Constitucionales
CENIDH	Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos
CEPAD	Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas Pro – Alianza
CETERS	Centro Educativo Técnico Regional de Salud, Nurses School of RAAN
CIEETS	Centro Intereclesial de Estudios Teológicos y Sociales
CIIR	Catholic Institute of International Relations
CONPES	Concejo Nacional de Planificación Económica y Social
COWI	COWI Consulting Engineers and Planners AS
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DKK	Danish Kroner
ERRP	Estrategia de Reducción de la Pobreza
FOKUS	Forum for Women and Development (Forum for kvinner og utviklingsspørsmål)
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional
FUNAP	Fondo de Naciones Unidas para la Población
GNP	Gross National Product
INGO	International Non Governmental Organisation
INTRAC	International NGO Training and Research Centre
KN	Kirkens Nødhjelp (Norwegian Church Aid)
LAG	Latin-Amerikagruppene i Norge (Norwegian Latin American Groups)
LAHF	Latin American Health Fund
LO	Landsorganisasjonen i Norge (Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions)
LUG/MSF	Leger Uten Grenser (Medecins Sans Frontieres)
MCN	Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MinFam	Ministerio de la Familia
NAFO	Nasjonalforeningen for folkehelsen (National Organisation for Public Health)
NBF	Norges Blindforbund (Norwegian Association of Blind People)
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NICNGO	Nicaraguan Non-Governmental Organisation
NOK	Norwegian Kroner
NL	Norsk Lærerlag (The Norwegian Union of Teachers)
NNGO	Norwegian Non Governmental Organisations
NF	Norsk Folkehjelp (Norwegian People's Aid)

NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation
NPA	Norwegian People's Aid
NU	Noregs Ungdomslag (Norwegian Youth Association)
PAS	Programa de Agricultura Sostenible de CARE
PME	Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RAAN	Región Autónoma Atlántico Norte
RB	Redd Barna (Save the Children, Norway)
RBC	Rehabilitación en Base a la Comunidad
SAIH	Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund
SIDA	Agencia Sueca para el Desarrollo Internacional
SK	Swedish Kroner
SNV/NDR	Royal Norwegian Society for Development (det Kgl. Selskap for Norges Vel)
ToR	Terms of Reference
UCA	Universidad Centroamericana
UNAG	Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos
URACCAN	Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense
UTVF	Norwegian Development Fund (Utviklingsfondet)
WFP	World Food Programme

Factsheet

This evaluation concerns Norwegian Public Support to NNGOs working in Nicaragua during the period 1994–99. During this period a total of some NOK 225 million of public support – approximately 40% of total Norwegian Bilateral Aid – was channelled via 27 NNGOs to Nicaragua. The evaluation included the work of 8 Norwegian NGOs currently working in Nicaragua and 15 of the projects that they support. Over 200 people were interviewed during the evaluation of whom some 120 were project beneficiaries.

With a population of some 4.6 million, Nicaragua is one of the poorest and most aid-dependent countries in the world, and over 3,000 national NGOs have emerged around technical assistance programmes. There are also over 150 international NGOs currently operating in Nicaragua.

According to “Terms of Reference” the purpose of the evaluation was to get an overview of the Norwegian public support to NNGOs and their local partners and assess the results, relevance and efficiency of this assistance. Some of the

key variables used to achieve this were: Relevance of project interventions, efficiency and effectiveness, development impact, sustainability of project interventions, promoting the position of women, promoting participation, supporting democratisation, the fight against poverty, promoting partnership, capacity building and systems of monitoring and evaluations.

The report’s analysis comprises the changing context of NNGO work, the structure and management of NNGO support, the balance sheet of NNGO performance, NNGO and NICNGO views on their major achievements and the future challenges for NNGOs in Nicaragua. The report gives several recommendations of improvements.

A team of five European and three Nicaraguan consultants undertook the evaluation in the period September 2000 – February 2001.

The total amount spent on the evaluation was NOK 1,395,209.

Executive Summary

Introduction and Context

This evaluation concerns Norwegian Public Support to NNGOs working in Nicaragua during the period 1994–99. During this period a total of some NOK 225 million of Public Support – approximately 40% of total Norwegian Bilateral Aid – was channelled via 27 NNGOs to Nicaragua. The evaluation included the work of 8 NNGOs currently working in Nicaragua and 15 of the projects that they support. Over 200 people were interviewed during the evaluation of whom some 120 were project beneficiaries.

This Evaluation has been a demanding and challenging undertaking during which we relied upon and received the support of many colleagues, programme and project staff, and local people in both Nicaragua and Norway. Our warmest thanks to them all for their willingness to co-operate and for the positive way in which they engaged with us. We hope that we have done justice to their opinions and judgements in our report.

With a population of some 4.6 million, Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries not just in Latin America but in the world. Its statistical profile amply reflects the endemic poverty that the majority of its people suffer. Politically the country remains divided on lines that were drawn at the time of the 1979 Sandinista revolution. The Sandinistas lost power in 1990 and successive liberal governments have increased the social and economic polarisation of the country. Nicaragua is one of the most aid-dependent countries in the world and over 3,000 national NGOs have emerged around technical assistance programmes. There are also over 150 international NGOs currently operating in Nicaragua. Emerging Nicaraguan civil society organisations and their co-ordination at the national level represent the creation of countervailing power to the authority of the State.

Key reference documents for the period of the evaluation include: *Strategies for Development Co-operation: NORAD in the Nineties* (Part I, 1990) and *Strategies for Bilateral Development Co-operation: Basic Principles* (Part II, 1992). These basic policy documents have been superseded in 2000 by the most recent statement on Norwegian Development Co-operation: *NORAD Invests in the Future: NORAD's Strategy 2000–2005*. In the 1990s, the ultimate goal of Norwegian development assistance was to contribute to lasting changes in the economic, social and political conditions of the poor in developing countries. The strategy aimed to give particular attention to the underlying causes of poverty.

NNGOs have become an important means of channelling Norwegian Public Support; by 1999 NNGOs managed some 34% of total bilateral aid. In terms of Nicaragua the NGO share of total Norwegian disbursements has actually increased, from 34% over the period 1987–92 to an estimated 40% over the period 1994–99. A total of NOK 225 million was channelled through the Norwegian NGOs over this period. Between 1994 and 1999 a total of 27 different Norwegian NGOs implemented projects in Nicaragua. Norwegian Development Co-operation with Nicaragua was NGO-intensive in the early years after the revolution in 1979 and it is notable that this has continued. There have been understandable concerns to ensure a closer co-ordination between the official aid programme handled by NORAD and the activities implemented by the Norwegian NGOs.

The Performance of NNGOs as Development Agencies in Nicaragua: 1994–99.

A major dimension of the evaluation has been an assessment of the development performance of the Norwegian NGOs (NNGOs), in conjunction with their Nicaraguan Partner NGO (NICNGO), in terms of a number of key variables:

Relevance of Project Interventions: Most project interventions appear relevant to the development needs of the country. Furthermore, in terms of both Norwegian Aid priorities and approach and methodology, the projects were largely relevant. **Efficiency and Effectiveness:** In terms of efficiency we did not see any examples of an inefficient use of project inputs, of an inability to meet basic objectives or of negligent or excessive expenditure in relation to output. In the case of effectiveness, most of the projects studied were able to produce quantifiable evidence of their output in relation to expected targets. **Development Impact:** The concept of Impact proved largely elusive in terms of an accurate assessment of performance. This is mainly due to existing systems of project monitoring that tend to emphasise results as opposed to evidence of social change. A number of projects are beginning to experiment with approaches to measuring impact but they need further technical support. **Sustainability of Project Interventions:** There is clear evidence that several NNGOs are seeking ways to effectively secure the financial sustainability of their project interventions but, in the resource-poor context of Nicaragua, this is an up-hill task. **Promoting the Position of Women:** Many of the NNGOs' Partners seek to promote a gender perspective in their work but they cannot always give it the attention that it merits. Overall there were many examples of deliberate efforts to direct project benefits at women but less so in terms of the use of a more direct gender perspective or analysis in project work. **Promoting Participation:** NNGOs and their Partners appear solidly in tune with "bottom-up" development. But generally for most of the projects, participation is essentially a means for both effective intervention and sustainability. Most had yet to move to the next stage in which community participation becomes an issue of ownership. **Supporting Democratisation:** Several of the NICNGOs that NNGOs support are active in promoting the rights and interests of the poor and of promoting greater community involvement at the municipal level. **The Fight against Poverty:** NORAD's broad development objective is based on poverty alleviation. In this

respect the majority of the projects supported by NNGOs in Nicaragua fall within this objective. However, poverty alleviation is more implicit than explicit in NNGO's strategies and NNGOs could usefully build it more consistently into their project analysis and reporting.

Critical Dimensions of NNGO Development Activities in Nicaragua

Promoting Partnership: The relations between NNGOs and NICNGOs would appear to cover most of the current range of interpretations of Partnership. These partnerships are built largely on a good operational relationship, although some also appear to include shared vision and strategy. Some of the longer-standing NNGOs have built up impressive partnerships with NICNGOs and most of the Nicaraguan Partners were complimentary of the positive and supportive manner of the NNGOs.

Capacity Building: Capacity Building (CB) combines elements of organisational development, human resource development, alliances and networks and, ultimately, empowerment. In this respect, it is difficult to be categorical in relation to the work of NNGOs in capacity building in Nicaragua in the past decade. While we witnessed many capacity building activities, there was a clear lack of strategy in terms of explicit plans of action to promote more effective capacity building.

Systems of Monitoring and Evaluation: Currently NNGO M&E systems are strong on results that are quantitative but weak in terms of monitoring social change. Other weaknesses include: (a) lack of balance between narrative/analysis; (b) repetition in the sense of seemingly reporting on the same things in the same way each time; and (c) over-ambitious frameworks of indicators that are rarely operationalised.

NNGOs Working with Government: Historically NNGO support to Nicaragua has been built around the values and purposes of the Sandinista revolution of 1979. However, since

the political change of 1990, few NNGOs deal directly with government administration at whatever level, though several of their Partners have established useful working relations particularly with municipal authorities. There is clear evidence that, where there is potential, NNGOs do seek to strengthen government structures at the municipal level.

Working with Civil Society: Generally there are clear indications that NNGOs seek to work constructively with Nicaraguan Civil Society. Basically NNGO support is at two levels: (a) the development intervention level within the context of community or municipal strengthening and (b) the national level in terms of the involvement of civil society organisations in the structures of national dialogue.

NNGOs and the wider International Development Community in Nicaragua: There is a coherence of views largely built around the post-Mitch efforts but also in keeping with what appears to be a common donor platform in respect of the reform of the Nicaraguan State. In this respect Norwegian Bilateral Aid and NNGOs are in agreement with these broad aims.

The Good Use of Public Funds: It is generally believed that the misuse of public funds is fairly widespread in Nicaragua. In this situation NNGOs in Nicaragua implement a strict system of financial management that is basically sound. In the vast majority of cases this system ensures that Norwegian public funds are used essentially for their stated purpose.

Analysis Conclusions and Recommendations

The balance sheet of this evaluation of Norwegian Public Support to Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua between 1994–99 is a generally healthy one. The work of NNGOs appears to be generally appreciated and, in a number of cases, highly respected.

The Changing Context of NNGO Work in Nicaragua: It would appear that the whole issue of Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua is under debate. The Norwegian Government is currently reviewing its State-to-State co-operation between the two countries. Whatever the exact outcome of this review, it will have consequences for the NNGOs working in the country.

The Structure and Management of NNGO Support to Nicaragua: Currently there is limited capacity to provide greater coherence and co-ordination that reduces the possibilities for synergy between NNGO activities in Nicaragua. There is also the issue of the co-ordination between the NNGOs and the official bilateral programme. This is a delicate issue, and it is important to get the balance between public efficiency and the autonomy of NNGOs right. Little serious consideration had been given to examine ways in which greater added-value could be achieved in terms of overall Norwegian Public Support to Nicaragua. There are two programmes – the State-to-State Bilateral Programme and that of the NNGOs – which appear to operate in two very different worlds. Furthermore the role and the capacity of Norwegian Embassy to play a more proactive role in shaping the overall bilateral programme and managing a strategy that seeks to strengthen the contribution of the NNGOs should be examined. Currently the Embassy's role is minimalist and largely passive and reactive.

The procedures that govern the project cycle take place mostly in Oslo but their consequences are felt in Nicaragua. Positively, most NNGOs welcome the largely “hands-off” style of management of the DCS; negatively NNGOs are more concerned at the increasing administrative burdens associated with the project cycle.

The Balance Sheet of NNGO Performance in Nicaragua: Our overall assessment of the (development) performance of NNGOs in Nicaragua is a generally positive one in terms of their use of Norwegian Public Funds. However

there are areas in which NNGO performance in Nicaragua could be strengthened:

- The organisational development of NNGO partner organisations
- Examining their work in terms of lessons and implications for future policy and practice
- The limited nature of NNGO M&E systems
- The lack of strategy in some NNGO work
- The geographical spread of NNGO-supported development initiatives in Nicaragua.

NNGO and NICNGO views on their major achievements in Nicaragua:

- The strengthening of the Nicaraguan NGO sector specifically, and Nicaraguan civil society in general
- The strengthening of the position of Nicaraguan women within development initiatives
- The forging of links between popular organisations in Norway and Nicaragua
- The promotion of alternative approaches and methodologies to development interventions.

The Future Challenges for NNGOs in Nicaragua:

The future direction of the Norwegian bilateral aid programme;

- To maintain the momentum of development work
- NNGO development strategies and approach
- The increasing hostility of the Nicaraguan State to international NGO activities.

Recommendations

- The MFA should undertake a less operationally focused but a more strategic and “visionary” examination of the work of NNGOs in Nicaragua, not as a major exercise but as a substantial seminar or workshop.
- The MFA should undertake a detailed examination of the roles and responsibilities of the various actors involved in the management, quality control and on-going analysis of Norwegian bilateral assistance via NNGOs.
- The MFA should take the steps necessary to put in place the mechanisms and procedures that would facilitate greater co-ordination of public funded development in Nicaragua.
- The MFA should commission an urgent and detailed review of the current project PME system of both NORAD and selected NNGOs.
- More careful and periodic assessments should be made of NNGO development projects receiving long-term support.
- NNGOs should look more closely at the current balance in their work in Nicaragua between immediate project practice and longer-term organisational development and capacity building. Capacity building, which includes organisational development, should now have a more prominent place and NNGOs should begin to address both issues in relation to their Partners and their own staff.

1. Introduction

In the past decade there has been an increasing interest on the part of both bilateral and multilateral international aid donors in the performance of development NGOs at the country, programme and project levels. During this period of time several studies were undertaken that sought to assess the collective performance of a group of NGOs either across a range of countries or in a specific single context. A common characteristic of these exercises – which tended to be seen as “studies” rather than “evaluations” – was the availability of quite substantial public funds to support NGO development activities. The interest – or concern – therefore was to assess the use of these public funds by the NGOs across a broad range of performance criteria.

It is in the context of the above that the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) commissioned an evaluation of the Public Support to Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua during the period 1994–99. (In this respect we should point out that, although the work being assessed falls outside of the current NORAD Strategy 2000–2001, we inevitably refer to the current strategy – where appropriate – in our discussions.) Furthermore, in 1998 the Norwegian MFA had commissioned an evaluation of the Development Co-operation between Norway and Nicaragua. This evaluation did not directly address the work or performance of Norwegian NGOs (**NNGOs**) and their Nicaraguan NGO Partners (**NICNGOs**), despite the fact that NGOs were responsible for the delivery of some 40% of Norwegian bilateral aid. However the evaluation did make several references to the lack of data and information on Norwegian NGO performance and alluded to the lack of NGO integration into the Norwegian bilateral aid programme in Nicaragua. It would appear that the 1998 evaluation has been a major influence in the decision to commission this evaluation. Discussions began between the MFA and Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua in early 2000 and Terms of Reference for the evaluation

were agreed. In July 2000 the MFA formally invited a Consortium of INTRAC (UK) and COWI (Denmark) to undertake the evaluation which would be completed by the end of the year.

The Terms of Reference for the evaluation (see Annex 1) include both a major focus on Norwegian NGO performance at the programme and project level as well as a number of broader issues: for example, their strategic positioning in Nicaragua; their relations with government structures at all levels; future scenarios for Norwegian NGO work in Nicaragua; and the general (development) thrust of their work. This is the first major evaluation of its kind that has been commissioned by the Norwegian MFA and it should provide an opportunity for a comprehensive assessment of Norwegian aid via NGOs in a country that has long been a priority for Norwegian bilateral aid. This bilateral aid to Nicaragua via NGOs has been consistently strong for the past two decades and it would appear appropriate to assess the impact of this aid to date. The evaluation, therefore, is *not* an evaluation of any one Norwegian NGO or any single project but a collective assessment of a substantial element of Norwegian bilateral aid that is channelled to one of the world’s poorest countries via the Norwegian NGO community. The evaluation also is heavily operational. In this respect we have not looked deliberately at broader issues related to NGOs as development agents although we shall refer to several of these in our conclusions.

In this respect we should note that this evaluation of Public Support to NNGOs working in Nicaragua is the first study undertaken by the MFA of NNGOs collectively in a country in which Norwegian bilateral aid operates. Norway channels a substantial portion of its bilateral aid via NNGOs in the expectation that, within the context of overall bilateral aid policy and priorities, they will give an added dimension to Norwegian aid. This evaluation, therefore,

should provide an interesting insight into the effectiveness of this policy of substantial bilateral aid via NNGOs.

The key building blocks of the evaluation were the Norwegian NGOs, their Partner Nicaraguan NGOs and a number of specific development programme/projects that we used as vehicles to examine a whole range of performance variables. We developed a matrix of Norwegian NGOs and Partner Projects that became the basis for our examination of the key performance variables. We recognise, of course, that the projects that we visited are but a small percentage of the total of projects supported by Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua during the period under study. Overall the matrix included

8 of the 27 NNGOs that had supported one or more development projects in Nicaragua during the period 1994–99. However, given the presence of the larger NNGOs, it included crucially a group of NNGOs that together were responsible for an estimated 85% of the total NNGO support to Nicaragua during the period. Many of the other NNGOs had had only limited involvement in Nicaragua or had suspended their support during the period under study. Therefore, the number of NNGOs included in the matrix is small, collectively their involvement represented the greater part of NNGO involvement in Nicaragua from 1994–99. The following is a summary of the NGOs and projects included in the evaluation:

Table 1. Matrix of Projects Included in the Evaluation

Project Number	Project Title	Norwegian NGO	Nicaraguan NGO or other Partner	Project Duration	Total Support NOK
NC 1	Farmers' Organisation in Esteli	NPA	UNAG Estelí	1992–1998	3.6 m.
NC 2	Human Rights in Matagalpa	NPA	CENIDH	1994–2000	1.7 m.
NC 3	Youth and Local Power in Esteli	NPA	DESAFIOS	1996–2000	1.6 m.
NC 4	Community-based rehabilitation support for children	Redd Barna	RBC	1991–2000	10. m.
NC 5	Foster Homes Programme	Redd Barna	MinFam	1990–2000	15 m.
NC 6	Education and other support to working children at the municipal rubbish tip	Redd Barna	Dos Generaciones	1991–2000	7.4 m.
NC 7	Organizational Development	SNV	UNAG IV Región	1992–1999	10 m.
NC 8	Health Infrastructure	LAHF	MCN – Estelí	1995–2002	6 m. to date
NC 9	CEPAD Three Year Plan	NCA	CEPAD	1994–1999	17 m.
NC 10	CIEETS Global Plan	NCA	CIEETS	1994–2000	6 m.
NC 11	Training of Trade Union Leaders	NL	ANDEN	1994–1999	1.2 m.
NC 12	Sustainable Agriculture	CARE – Norway	CARE – Nicaragua	1994–2000	28 m.
NC 13	The professionalisation of teachers and support to students organization	SAIH	URACCAN	1997– 2000	2.4 m.
NC 14	Prevention of AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Bilwi	SAIH	Centro Clínico Bilwi	1993– 2000	2.2 m.
NC 15	Text book and Curriculum Revision	SAIH	CETERS	1997– 1999	0.5 m.

N.B. The figures for total NNGO support in NOK are approximate and we believe that they include both 80/20 contributions. On some of the longer-running projects it was not always easy to estimate total financial input with absolute accuracy. Furthermore most of the support is expressed in US\$ terms and we do not have an average NOK-US\$ rate for the period of the study. However we believe that the amounts show the rough magnitude of the support for each project.

We used a number of criteria in the construction of the matrix. In the first instance we ensured that that it included the different Norwegian NGOs status *vis-à-vis* NORAD support: *Programme Organisations, Framework Agreements and Individual Projects*. Also we sought to ensure a geographical spread – Managua, Matagalpa, Masaya, Esteli, Chinandega and the RAAN – that reflected NNGO presence in different parts of the country. Other criteria included project sector, large and small projects and also a balance between projects that had been concluded and those that were still operational. Once we had a clear picture of the important criteria the NNGOs themselves, in consultation with their Nicaraguan Partners, made suggestions in terms of the more appropriate projects to include in the matrix. We visited each of the projects in the matrix – albeit for short, highly focused periods – and also conducted a number of discussions with NNGO and NICNGO staff involved in project implementation. While we may not be able to claim that our project matrix is wholly representative of Norwegian NGO involvement in Nicaragua, we would suggest that it is illustrative of the kinds of development

initiatives that they support. More crucially we would argue that the group of NNGOs directly involved in the evaluation is representative of NNGO involvement and performance in Nicaragua given the fact that between them they account for the greater part of public funds available to NNGOs. Essentially the evaluation was a limited exercise in terms of time and resources and the structure of the matrix has reflected those two key variables.

During the whole exercise we met and spoke with a wide range of Norwegian and Nicaraguan NGO staff, Key informants in Nicaragua and Nicaraguans who had benefited directly from one of the development interventions. Apart from reviewing pertinent documentation, the evaluation was essentially a people-centred exercise that allowed us to get stakeholders' views both on project performance and on the issues that could affect the effective delivery of Norwegian public support to NNGO development initiatives in Nicaragua. The following chart summarises the range of stakeholders whom we met, broken down by gender:

Table 2. Development Actors Consulted during the Evaluation

MFA and NORAD	Staff NGO Norway		Staff NGO Nicaragua		Field Staff		Project Beneficiaries		Key Informants	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
7	9	13	24	26	17	21	70	49	22	16

Collecting these numbers was not an exact science and many times we were in the company of staff or beneficiaries who did not directly participate. These numbers have not, therefore, been included. In this respect the numbers for beneficiaries are probably slightly inflated in terms of those whose opinions we actively sought. Finally we should note that the large number of Key Informants derives from a series of seminars that we held concerning several aspects of current development practice in Nicaragua.

Preparations for the evaluation were begun in September and October 2000, with visits to Oslo

and Managua to meet with the Norwegian NGOs, MFA and NORAD staff and Nicaraguan Partners. Multi-actor evaluations take a lot of preparation in order to get everyone in place before the main evaluation exercise can begin. Since we were to be in the field for a relatively short period of time, we had to make as many preparations as possible to ensure that all was in place for when the formal evaluation exercise finally took place. While preparations for the evaluation were continuous throughout October and early November 2000, the following chart shows the key events of the evaluation as a whole:

Date	Timetable of the Evaluation
19–21 Sept	Oslo: initial discussions, fact finding and analysis of Norwegian bilateral aid and the work of Norwegian NGOs; preparation of project matrix
29–30 Oct	Meeting in Managua with both Norwegian and Nicaraguan NGOs, work plan and preparations for setting up the evaluation
13–19 Nov	Initial documentation work, setting up of office by Nicaraguan colleagues
20 Nov–1 Dec	Full evaluation team in Nicaragua
2–8 Dec	Team Leader and Nicaraguan colleagues continue work
11–15 Dec	Two members of INTRAC-COWI team in Oslo; Nicaraguan colleagues complete final stages of evaluation

Coupled with often voluminous project documentation, the wide range of Nicaraguan and Norwegian development staff, beneficiaries and informants gave us the benefit of their knowledge and experience not only of projects supported by Norwegian NGOs but also on the issues, pressures and trends in development assistance and the role of NGOs in Nicaragua today. Nicaragua is possibly one of the most development assistance-fatigued countries in the world and extraordinary demands are constantly being made on those who seek to promote development and those who supposedly benefit from it. In the circumstances we felt that perhaps we got beyond the fatigue and explored with a large number of Nicaraguans whether Norwegian Public Support had made some difference to the development of their country. Indeed, the Nicaraguan NGOs were remarkably tolerant and constructive in their responses to our continual enquiries despite the almost constant pressure on them from one donor or another.

We should bear in mind that this evaluation is but a snapshot at a certain point in time of the involvement of a widely heterogeneous group of Norwegian NGOs who, for different purposes and with different approaches, support development initiatives in Nicaragua. NNGOs are a broad church and certainly not all would agree with each other in terms of strategies and priorities. In Nicaragua also there is little formal contact between the different NNGOs – apart from “co-ordination” meetings with the Norwegian Embassy – and certainly no effort to establish “common positions” on any particular issue. However, for the purposes of this evaluation we have taken the NNGO universe in Nicaragua as one and sought to assess both their individual and collective roles in and

impact on development initiatives in the country. In some instances we refer individually to the NNGOs and their projects. In others we take a consolidated or collective view of NNGO performance when we feel that our evidence is not precise enough for us to discuss the specific performance of a particular NNGO. Our approach, therefore, has been a “broad brush” one, but we feel that we have been able to capture the essential characteristics and achievements of NNGOs in Nicaragua and also the issues and dilemmas that they currently face. Our Terms of Reference asked us to look at Norwegian Public Support to NNGOs as a whole – and not individually – and we have tried to maintain this focus throughout. Finally we should point out that certain lines of our inquiries – for example, NNGO views on current project cycle or on the issue of “co-ordination” – are generic to NNGOs work overall and not just specific to Nicaragua.

Finally we would argue that we have been able to address the greater part of the Terms of Reference (ToRs) for this evaluation. These ToRs asked us to address an extremely wide range of variables and issues across a heterogeneous collection of development actors in a relatively short period of time. In many instances any one of the variables and issues that we evaluated could have served as the sole basis for a more in-depth study. Essentially the ToRs were most ambitious and demanded a quality of access to information that was not always possible. The Evaluation Team always took as the broad purposes of the ToRs (i) the capturing of a general but authoritative picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the project-based performance of NNGOs in Nicaragua in the latter 1990s; (ii) an assessment also of their performance in relation to a wider set of

variables; and (iii) a discussion of the kinds of factors or issues that could influence this performance in the future. In relation to specific sections of the ToRs (see Annex 1), we feel that we have been able to address more substantially issues 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7 and part of 3.8. Given the time available, however, we felt that issues 3.4, 3.6 and part of 3.8 demanded more substantial inquiry. The evaluation was always strongest when it was dealing with the NNGOs, their Partners and the infrastructure of Norwegian development assistance. Issues

relating to Nicaraguan government structures at different levels, to the wider international development community in the country, to longer-term financial sustainability and to deficiencies in project management, all demanded a level of inquiry that we were not able to meet. However we have referred to and offered some analysis of almost all of the issues raised in the ToRs and, as a result, we feel that we have presented a largely complete picture of NNGO performance in Nicaragua.

2 The Nicaraguan Context

Nicaragua has a strategic geographical position in Central America that has caused a succession of world powers to take an interest in it for the past two centuries. According to the 1995 census the population of Nicaragua stands at just under 4.6 million inhabitants. In the last 20 years the population has seen drastic changes affecting the social and cultural make-up of the country. Official statistics for 1996 show that some 53.6% of the population of Nicaragua lived in a state of chronic poverty. A more recent study in 2000 by the WFP suggested that 80% of the population live in chronic poverty and some 44% on less than US\$1 per day. Demographic indicators from FUNAP (1998) for the years 1995–2000 put the growth rate at 2.6%, which is higher than the 1.9% for the rest of Central America. The fertility rate is 3.85%, which is 0.81% above the other countries, and infant mortality is the highest in the region at 44 per 1,000 live births. Furthermore the rate of pregnancy in girls aged 15–19, stands at 149 per 1,000. Life expectancy from birth is the lowest in Central America: 70.6 years for women and 65.8 for men. Overall the country's population profile has a strong concentration of people aged up to and 24 years.

After many years of social unrest, a social and political revolution broke out in 1979 ending 45 years of the Somoza dictatorship. It was led by the FSLN in alliance with a broad range of social groups. Although the 1980s saw an essentially centralised state, the 1987 constitutional reforms gave municipalities some say in national development. However, these changes were severely limited by the internal conflict in the 1980s that was brought about by attempts, aided by the USA, to overthrow the country's legitimate Sandinista government and generally to destabilise it.

The first democratic elections after the 1979 revolution were held in 1990. The FSLN lost, and the new government was made up of a collection of different political sectors opposed to *Sandinismo*. The six years of President

Chamorro's administration were conducted in a highly polarised context and have been seen as a transition period, marked by rural violence, urban insecurity and an increase in poverty levels. However, there was also a strong growth of civil society organisations. Under pressure from international financial institutions, policies of deregulation were agreed and the country entered into a lengthy period of structural adjustment policies, all of which had a negative effect on the economic lives of the majority of Nicaraguans. In 1996 the incoming government of President Aleman resolved to continue to implement the economic measures negotiated with the international finance organisations. At present Nicaragua is about to enter the inevitable turbulence of an election as a new president will be elected in November 2001.

Throughout the 1990s Nicaragua saw changes in economic and social policies that resulted in a harsher and more financially disciplined economic environment. The results of this can be seen in the initial recuperation of certain indicators, such as the GNP which has been rising since 1990, and also in the disappearance of programmes such as funding for small production businesses and rural credit. Unemployment has risen and the State has largely abandoned its role in the provision of public services. Between 1995–96 it is estimated that unemployment reached 11.8% of the economically active population. A reduction in national debt and an increase in exports, which reached US\$ 444 million in 1994, accompanied the growth in GNP (BID: 1995). However, factors such as the end of the armed conflict, the improvement of economic indicators and the implementation of measures imposed by multinational organisations to reduce national debt have not resulted in better economic conditions for most of the population. In 1999 the GNP stood at US\$ 2,400 million, which translates to an income per head of US\$ 490. In 2000 inflation is around 15%, and formal and informal employment are much higher than the

mid-1990s. Interest rates currently average 19% annually.

After various failed attempts the Nicaraguan Government now has a *Reinforced Strategy to Reduce Poverty*, which is based on economic development with particular emphasis on rural areas where poverty is more widespread and more intense. It also contains a significant level of investment in basic social infrastructure and some actions designed to help those particularly vulnerable to extreme poverty. The strategy is very much based on donor support. According to FUNAP, the Reinforced Strategy to Reduce Poverty will soon become the backbone of national efforts in the area of development and external co-operation. The strategy establishes aims for 2005 within the framework of international aims to halve world poverty by half by the year 2015. Each aim refers to a different aspect of poverty, but they come together to form a unified whole. For this reason progress is made on each aim simultaneously. The thread linking progress towards the aims is without doubt the improvement of living conditions for women and their enjoyment of conditions equal to those of men, based on the fulfilment and guarantee of their rights.

It could be said that the consolidation of democracy, the construction of an articulate civil society and the fight against poverty are the major challenges facing Nicaragua today. Even with the advances made in the democratic process during the elections of the 1990s, the political system is still fragile and vulnerable. The democratisation of politics, which emphasises civic representation, is being undertaken without a democratic culture, civil participation or economic and social development. The democratic model has so far ignored the increasing social and economic inequality and the subsequent problems of extreme poverty, ecological crisis, increased migration and discrimination against women and indigenous groups. As the country passes through successive electoral periods it also passes through stages like "the reform of the State" and "the liberalisation of the market" without bringing about any real changes in the

lives of the poor. Corruption, impunity and public incompetence are the results of weak institutions and the lack of democratic values.

Nicaraguan documentation sees civil society as including all organisations that represent private interests and that have total independence from the State; social movements, unions, community organisations and other diverse organisations such as NGOs. Civil society constitutes a vital element in the consolidation of democracy but we recognise that in Nicaragua civil society is still in the process of formation. Today, Nicaraguan civil society still appears weak, dispersed and with an agenda that is either inarticulate or poorly projected. However, that is not to say that there are no important achievements, sustained efforts or initiatives coming from certain social actors which do dynamise the democratic and socio-economic processes. Indeed, never before has Nicaragua seen such a proliferation of civil society organisations with such a diversity of actions, focus, proposals and achievements. These are a combination of NGOs, social movements, pressure groups and media that together total nearly 3,000 organisations. It is worth noting that this phenomenon is largely due to the high level of international co-operation existing in Nicaragua today, especially non-governmental co-operation.

It is important to place any analysis of civil society organisations in Nicaragua in the context of the process of democratisation that began in the 1990s. This influenced the traditional structures of social organisation, which had before been dominated by popular organisations and guilds. The increase and participation of other civil society organisations such as NGOs is associated with the new agendas brought by international governments and organisations to Nicaragua after the end of conflict and violence. The new stabilisation and adjustment policies combined with efforts to institutionalise citizen's rights and strengthen the new democratic electoral systems, and the socio-economic effects of the adjustment policies have created a new economic and social environment. In this new environment NGOs in

particular have increasingly taken on activities which were before under the remit of the State.

Social problems have been aggravated by the reduction of the State's responsibility for social services, the effects of privatisation, the liberalisation of the economy and the effects of globalisation on a country with a limited ability to compete. Such problems include displacement and migration, insecurity and violence, social and public corruption, the break-up of the rural textile industry and, linked to all of these, the rapid destruction of natural resources and territorial inequalities. In these circumstances development takes on a new dimension and a new importance for the international community. This tendency was reinforced by the Hurricane Mitch Emergency Programme that revealed the social, economic and ecological vulnerability of Nicaragua. This partly explains the birth of new civil society organisations around the issues of development, democratisation and governability. Nicaraguan NGOs are in a boom period and the old social movements are generally in decline. International co-operation has become a major player at national level and new actors are emerging such as indigenous groups, women and local communities. Nicaraguan society as a whole has become a diverse mixture of interests and groupings, combining old and new movements and players.

Over the past decade or so Nicaraguan NGOs have come to assume important roles in the country's development. They are very varied, and most cover a variety of development issues within their broad mission. It is possible to signal two main groups: operational NGOs that principally design and carry out development projects; and politically active NGOs that principally defend or promote a cause and aim to influence policy-making. Currently, Nicaraguans are experiencing various problems, the most significant of which is a growing dependence on international co-operation agencies for resources. Levels of organisational development and the capacity to achieve sustainability and credibility are varied.

Studies suggest that there might be up to 3,000 national NGOs in Nicaragua.

Most Nicaraguan civil society organisations and the majority of international NGOs work in the area of sustainable development. They see this as an integrated process encompassing poverty, environment, human rights, childhood, gender and vulnerability. It is also as linked to the construction of citizenship, the development of civil society and an increase in democracy. In Nicaragua there are over 100 environmental projects alone initiated by different co-operation agencies. It is important to recognise both the many positive experiences of these projects, but also the difficulties caused by the variety of policies and intervention that the projects develop. There are also over 150 international NGOs in the country.

Law 147, entitled "General Law Governing Not-for-Profit Organisations" regulates both the national and international NGOs working on development issues in Nicaragua. This law, passed by the National Assembly in 1992, makes no difference in the norms regulating the presence and operation of national and international NGOs. Moreover, it applies indiscriminately to all organisations and institutions that make up civil society. The concept of a not-for-profit body includes organisations ranging from a typical NGO to religious groups, sports societies and others. The law is extremely general, and contains no obligation beyond that of registering with the government as a public institution and providing financial accounts. The objective is to *"regulate the constitution, authorisation, functions and termination of legal civil and religious not-for-profit bodies already existing in the country and that emerge in the future."* However, the dominant position of international NGOs and the nature of their work means that the government is not the most appropriate body to regulate them.

The gap left by this law has been filled by "Co-operation Agreements" between the international NGOs and their governments via the Ministry of External Relations, specifically

the Secretary of Economic Relations and Co-operation. However, international NGOs are still worried about their legal security in the country. This worry, which is an issue that was raised during this study, is caused by the problems of governability facing the country at the present time. In particular, international NGOs are concerned about differences of opinion and conflicts between the Nicaraguan government and the international co-operation community. The international NGOs have therefore proposed a framework agreement that would fill the gap in regulation and legal security. This is a result of negotiations with the Secretariat which links the Secretaries for Economic Relations and for Co-operation, the head of which has given his assurance that his approval is only awaiting the go-ahead from the Ministry for External Relations.

In conclusion we can state that international NGOs have made – and continue to make – an

important contribution to assist Nicaragua face the challenges of development. One immediate difficulty, however, is the difficulty of measuring this impact in quantitative terms. The situation is made even more difficult by several current critical aspects of the Nicaraguan economy: government macro economic measures, deregulation of the economy, the negative impact of globalisation and the reduction of the State's role. Other difficulties are caused by a lack of efficient co-ordination of support policies. This situation limits the impact of the work and creates dispersal and fragmentation of potential improvements to beneficiaries. It is also caused by a lack of communication between official co-operation, non-governmental co-operation, and the development activities promoted by international financial organisations.

(See Annex 4 for the complete review of the Nicaraguan Context)

3 The Structure and Profile of Norwegian NGO Support to Nicaragua

3.1 Strategy, priorities and framework of Norwegian official aid

Official Norwegian Development Co-operation dates back some 40–50 years. However Norwegian aid strategies and priorities have changed over time in response to new challenges in the recipient countries and international development thinking. For the purpose of the present evaluation, the most relevant reference documents are *Strategies for Development Co-operation: NORAD in the Nineties* (Part I, 1990) and *Strategies for Bilateral Development Co-operation: Basic Principles* (Part II, 1992). These basic policy documents were superseded in 2000 by the most recent statement on Norwegian Development Co-operation: NORAD Invests in the Future: NORAD's Strategy 2000–2005. However, although we will refer to this most recent policy statement in our conclusions, the bulk of the analysis of this evaluation was undertaken within the context of the earlier strategy statements. The only other strategic document that we were able to consult was *Strategy for Assistance to Children* (1992), that has guided Redd Barna's work in Nicaragua.

In the 1990s, the ultimate goal of Norwegian development assistance was to contribute to lasting changes in the economic, social and political conditions of the poor in developing countries. The strategy aimed to give particular attention to the underlying causes of poverty. In a situation where many developing countries had become dependent upon a form of development assistance in which donors have strongly influenced the conditions of assistance, the goal was to enable the developing countries to deal with their own problems of poverty in a sustainable way. It was an important aim, therefore, to integrate the Norwegian development assistance with the recipient countries' own institutions. In short, an overriding objective of Norwegian aid was that recipient countries themselves assumed responsibility for their own development.

Norwegian Bilateral Aid also stresses the key issue of sustainability in relation to political, economic and social development. The *political* dimension related to the development of democratic social structures, the right of individuals to participate in the planning of measures which affect their own lives, and the right of women to participate on equal terms with men. The *economic* dimension referred to the aim of satisfying the basic need for employment and income for both sexes. The *social* dimension included respect for social and cultural rights and entitlements. It also related to distribution of resources and the ability to provide such basic needs as education and health services.

In consequence of the objective to give to recipient countries the responsibility for their own development, NORAD recognised that substantial insight and knowledge was necessary if it was to have an active dialogue on development co-operation with government authorities. Geographic and sectoral concentration in individual countries was, therefore, a major objective. The Partners in Norwegian bilateral development co-operation were divided into three categories: (a) Programme Countries with comprehensive, long-term co-operation agreements; (b) Regions of Concentration; and (c) other countries outside the regions of co-operation. When the 1992 Strategy document (Part II) was published, Norway had 6 programme countries in Southern and Eastern Africa, 4 in Asia and 1 (Nicaragua) in Latin America. This evaluation, therefore, concerns Norway's principal bilateral aid partner in Latin America.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for the definition of overall and country-specific Norwegian bilateral and multilateral development co-operation. NORAD is a directorate under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is responsible for the practical implementation of the bilateral development co-operation, within the guidelines drawn up by the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As such, NORAD is the administrator of Norwegian development funds. Finally we should note that Norway currently provides around 0.9% of its GNP as aid to developing countries (DAC, 1999).

3.2 Norwegian NGOs and the official aid programme

According to the 1992 Strategy document, Norwegian Development Co-operation must be based upon broad involvement in, and positive attitudes to, Third World development among the general public in Norway. One way to ensure this has been to channel official development assistance through Norwegian NGOs. In Norway, the NGO era began in 1963, when the Government first channelled money through voluntary organisations; seven organisations received support for seven projects. Since then, the growth and use of the

NGO channel has been remarkable. Between 1963 and 1981, an average of 7% of total bilateral assistance was channelled through NGOs. Between 1980 and 1991 the degree of NORAD support to NGOs further increased and by 1991 it accounted for about 13%. The period of analysis for the present evaluation (1994–1999) has also seen a marked increase in the use of the NGO channel for Norwegian Bilateral Co-operation. Support to the NGO sector increased from NOK 810 million to NOK 1,266 million, an increase of more than 50%. Over the same period, the total bilateral development assistance increased by only 21%. By 1999 the NGO share of total Norwegian bilateral development assistance accounted for 34%.

NORAD's use of the NGO channel is significant, even by international standards. In recent years 17% (DKK 920m) of Denmark's bilateral development assistance has been channelled through NGOs. In 1999 about 9% (SEK 830 m)

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Bilateral Assistance NOK million	3.073	3.145	3.392	3.749	3.797	3.706
NGO share of total assistance	810	927	952	1.074	1.184	1.266
Per cent share	26	29	28	29	31	34

of the Swedish bilateral assistance disbursed by SIDA was channelled through NGOs.

The Norwegian NGO community has played – and continues to play – a crucial role in the implementation of Norwegian Development Co-operation policy:

Overall, NGOs play such a prominent role that they can be considered agents of the aid system. They have an influence on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Parliament on policy issues. This situation raises concern about their degree of independence *vis-à-vis* the government. It is also debatable whether the MFA and NORAD have the capacity to monitor and evaluate so many NGOs and projects. (DAC, 1999)

The 1992 Strategy document (Part II) states that one of NORAD's major challenges is to achieve greater cohesion and co-ordination in Norwegian development co-operation. With this purpose in mind the document – *Guidelines for the Norwegian Support for NGOs* (1994) – lays out the overall framework and the basis on which Norwegian NGOs will play a part in the country's Development Co-operation. In particular the document refers to the importance of ensuring that both bilateral and NGO development initiatives are co-ordinated at the recipient country level. In this respect the co-ordination refers to that between the Norwegian Bilateral Aid programme and national NGOs who are supported directly by the Norwegian Embassy. In practice there seems to be more flexibility in regard to the activities of the Norwegian NGOs in relation to

the Norwegian bilateral programme at recipient country level. This is reflected, *inter alia*, in the wording of the budget propositions presented in the Norwegian Parliament. The proposition for the budget year 1999 stated (our translation): “The co-operation with the volunteer organisations is founded upon trust. The co-operation shall respect the identity, independence and uniqueness of the organisations.”

According to the 1994 Guidelines, the main challenge of the Norwegian NGOs is to support local grass-roots organisations and to contribute toward their organisational development. Among the main principles governing the co-operation between NORAD and the NGOs, the following can be highlighted:

- Development projects supported shall be a result of local initiative
- Norwegian NGOs must have a clearly defined function in relation to their local partners, in which the Norwegian partner should have an advisory function
- Each specific project must from its inception include plans for phasing out external support

It is also a requirement that the Norwegian NGOs take the necessary steps to ensure the regular evaluation of their development work, and that they submit the results and proposed follow-up to NORAD. Furthermore, NORAD support to Norwegian NGO projects is limited to a maximum of 80% of the budgeted costs. A minimum of 20% shall be raised by the applicant organisation. Moreover, such funding shall represent the Norwegian people’s voluntary contribution to the development work.

NORAD has the following three models for co-operation with the Norwegian NGOs:

- Individual Initiatives
- Project-Based Framework Agreements
- Programme-Based Framework Agreements

Each NGO receiving support from NORAD has to prepare a development strategy indicating

thematic priorities and geographic distribution. Programme and Framework Organisations have to submit project lists for the approval of NORAD each year. Both may reallocate funds to development projects during the year. Programme organisations are structured around core themes, while Framework Organisations are project oriented. Otherwise, the difference between the two types of framework agreements does not seem to be substantial.

The official development assistance channelled through Norwegian NGOs is handled by NORAD’s Department for Civil Society (DCS). This Department has a staff of about 20 persons. The internal organisation of the DCS is based upon the Norwegian NGOs – the *channel* of support – rather than upon recipient countries or thematic sectors. NORAD’s contact with the Norwegian NGOs is, understandably, largely dominated by programming and by budgetary issues. As a result less time is available for dialogue on policy or specific issues at the level of country, sector or individual projects, although we understand that effective dialogue does take place within the framework agreements and on thematic issues, as appropriate. The grant period for Norwegian NGO projects is limited to one year. NORAD may give a commitment *in principle* for NGO projects with a duration of several years, but contracts are entered into only for one year at a time. Unused funds have to be returned at the end of every year, even for long-term projects. Accordingly NORAD allocates funds to Norwegian NGOs once per year. Projects are first screened according to a range of criteria and then *approved in principle*. Subsequently, when the total budget for NGOs is known, grants are allocated to the approved projects. The Norwegian embassies are involved from an early stage in the project selection process. NORAD sends the NGO applications to the relevant embassies, which are asked to assess especially the local partners of the Norwegian NGOs and the relation of the proposed projects *vis-à-vis* other Norwegian assistance to the country in question. Subsequently, NORAD normally sends a selection of the NGO

applications to the in-house department of sector specialists. In some cases, the desk officers at NORAD work closely with the relevant country office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 1999 NORAD's *rejection rate* of Norwegian NGO project proposals was about 20% in relation to the total amount of applications received. If funds are scarce, priority is given to the well-established NGOs with the result that fewer funds are available for projects in new countries. The availability of funds is a strong guiding factor in budget allocations and the initial quality of the project appears not to be a major determinant. NORAD expects that in the future there will be less focus on the administration of projects and more on strategy.

3.3 Strategy and content of Norwegian official aid to Nicaragua

Norway's Development Co-operation with Nicaragua began after the Sandinista revolution in 1979. The initial support was channelled through NGOs. Official development assistance has been provided since 1984, and Nicaragua was given status as a Programme Country in 1988. In October 1993 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a Country Strategy for the Norwegian Development Co-operation with Nicaragua. However the availability of this document *in full* in either English or Spanish appears limited. Certainly the Evaluation Team was only able to examine a copy in Norwegian. However we are informed that an outline of the Country Strategy is available in Spanish in another NORAD document. This 1993 country strategy document is still in force, but a new one is apparently currently under preparation. Nonetheless, it is surprising that such a key document is not readily available to a non-Norwegian speaking audience.

As part of the country strategy it was decided to make Nicaraguan Government institutions the primary partners of Norwegian Development Co-operation state-to-state support. This decision drew attention to the role of the Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua. They had

played a central part in the co-operation between the two countries until the early 1990s, accounting for NOK 174 million of the total assistance of NOK 515 million over the period 1987–92. The work of the Norwegian NGOs had been planned and implemented independently of the Country Programme and it had been seen as complementary to the main bilateral programme largely because the Country Programme did not include the social areas on which the NGOs had focused. It would appear that, while NNGOs were not expected to direct their support to certain regions of the country and development sectors in Nicaragua within the context of the Country Strategy, there was an unwritten agreement that NORAD and the NGOs would actively try and co-operate within the framework of the overall objectives of Norwegian support to Nicaragua.

The overall aim of the Norwegian Bilateral Country Programme is to contribute to the sustainable development of Nicaragua. The Country Strategy outlined four specific objectives:

- Strengthen human rights and democratic development
- Increase production within selected sectors
- More ecologically sustainable management of natural resources
- Strengthen Nicaragua's human resources.

Most of these priorities had a countrywide scope and all could readily encompass the work and approach of NNGOs. Furthermore the strategy suggests that it would be advantageous to concentrate part of the Norwegian assistance in specific geographic areas. Regions I, V and VI, as well as the Atlantic Coast, were mentioned as possible focus areas, but it was also stated that the security situation in these areas could make this difficult. As such, the Country Strategy was not conclusive in respect of the geographical orientation of Norwegian assistance. Over the period 1994–99, Nicaragua received bilateral development assistance from Norway for a total of NOK 615 million. Nicaragua was by far the largest recipient of Norwegian development assistance in Latin

America, and it ranked ninth on NORAD's list of recipient countries (NORAD 1999).

3.4 Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua: 1994–99

Reviewing the period 1994–99 in the light of Country Strategy, several interesting observations can be made. In the first instance, the Norwegian NGOs have continued to play an important role in Norwegian bilateral assistance to Nicaragua. The NGO share of total Norwegian disbursements to Nicaragua has actually *increased*, from 34% over the period 1987–92 to an estimated 40% over the period 1994–99. A total of NOK 225 million was channelled through the Norwegian NGOs over this period. We would, however, add a note of caution that these percentage figures may be on the high side since it has proved difficult to accurately separate out the percentage of Norwegian Bilateral Aid to Nicaragua via NNGOs. However, there is no doubt that during the period 1994–99 the percentage of Norwegian Bilateral Aid disbursed in Nicaragua via NNGOs increased from the figure for the previous five years. The increase was not substantial, but it is noticeable.

Furthermore, the Norwegian official Country Strategy for Nicaragua stated that the NGOs would continue to play an important developmental role in Nicaragua, especially in terms of the promotion of democracy and in the social sectors. Bearing in mind, however, that it was decided to make the Nicaraguan Government institutions the primary partners of Norwegian state-to-state development assistance, the 25% increase in the NGO share of total disbursements to Nicaragua does not seem to be in line with official policy statements. This is so because the Norwegian NGOs generally do not work to any great extent through the Central Government institutions in Nicaragua. They tend to work primarily through local Nicaraguan NGOs and other agents of civil society. On the other hand, the sectoral distribution of the Norwegian NGO support has generally been in accordance with the Country Strategy, in terms of the special role foreseen for NGOs in the areas of democracy and the social sectors.

Between 1994 and 1999 a total of 27 different Norwegian NGOs implemented projects in Nicaragua. The number of Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua each year with funds from NORAD has been as follows:

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Number of NNGOs	18	19	21	18	14	14

It has not been possible to determine the reasons for the drop in numbers of active NNGOs in Nicaragua during the period covered by this evaluation, although the reason(s) would appear to be coincidental and not a deliberate policy of restriction. We estimate that over the period 1994–99 about 120 separate NGO projects, irrespective of their duration, were operational. The amount of funds granted to each NGO project has varied considerably, even at the level of the annual grants. SAIH, for example, received NOK 7,000 in 1995 for the renovation of a children's centre. In the same year KN received NOK 3.6 million for a community development programme. Moreover, some of the larger NGOs have received a

number of large grants for to what in effect were multi-activity *programmes*. CARE-Norway, for example, received only 10 grants, but they accounted for nearly NOK 25million or 11% of all the funds channelled through the Norwegian NGOs. By comparison, NL received 17 grants, but accounted for only NOK 2million or 1% of the total funds.

3.5 Issues and analysis

It is understandable that Norwegian Development Co-operation with Nicaragua was NGO-intensive in the early years after the revolution in 1979. But it is notable that this

should continue to be the case 20 years later. Admittedly, the current political situation in Nicaragua does not lend itself to increased government-to-government co-operation, but the share of NGO assistance is high, even by Norwegian standards. The NNGO share of total Norwegian bilateral assistance during the period 1994–99 to all recipient countries was about 30%. However, the NNGO share of Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua during the same period could have been as high as 40%, which is considerably higher than this global average (we have already noted the difficulties of accuracy in relation to these figures). It is also interesting to compare these figures with the other Scandinavian countries. In 1999 only 5% of Sweden's co-operation with Nicaragua was disbursed through NGOs, and the same figure for Denmark was about 15%. Why is the NNGO share of Norwegian bilateral assistance to Nicaragua so high – 40% in 1999 – and why did it increase from 34% in the period 1987–92 to an estimated 40% in the period 1994–99? The following points may provide an answer.

The policies of the Liberal Government of Nicaragua have not been in line with overall Norwegian aid policies. It has been difficult, therefore, to increase – or even to maintain – State-to-State co-operation in the latter half of the 1990s. As the Norwegian Government has been *politically* committed to provide a certain level of total aid flows to Nicaragua, the Norwegian NGOs have found the MFA and NORAD relatively receptive to demands for increased funding for projects in Nicaragua. NORAD's DCS has enjoyed a high measure of autonomy in relation to the Norwegian NGOs. It has, however, tended to *respond* to NNGO applications for funding for Nicaragua, rather than acting in a proactive manner. The individual NGO applications are approved within the framework of the 1994 NGO Guidelines. NORAD's Regional Department for Latin America and the Norwegian Embassy in Managua are also able to influence the allocations of the DCS, although we were unable to verify the extent of this influence. It would appear, therefore, that the growth recorded in the NGO share of the total support to Nicaragua

is a result of decisions – at the level of individual NGO-project applications – taken by the DCS.

Given the powerful position of NNGOs in Nicaragua vis-à-vis the Norwegian bilateral aid programme, there have been understandable concerns to ensure a closer co-ordination between the official aid programme and the activities implemented by the Norwegian NGOs. Indeed the 1998 evaluation of the Bilateral Aid programme referred strongly to the clear lack of such co-ordination. Despite these calls for closer co-ordination between the two main vehicles of Norwegian Development Co-operation, we found very little evidence that this had been achieved in any meaningful way or that the main protagonists were particularly concerned to promote “greater co-ordination”, whatever that might imply. There would appear to be a number of possible reasons for this situation:

There have been conflicting policy signals and unclear aims in respect to co-ordination. The key documents – *the 1992 Strategy Document for NORAD*, the *1994 Country Strategy for Nicaragua*, the *1994 Guidelines for NGO-support*, and the annual budget proposals presented in the Norwegian Parliament – have contained different/conflicting positions on the issue of co-ordination. As the actors involved on the *public* side of the Norwegian NGO co-operation with Nicaragua (MFA, NORAD's Regions Department, and the DCS) play different roles, they appear to have *interpreted* the concept in accordance with their own interests.

The Norwegian Bilateral Aid Country Strategy for Nicaragua provides a loose and very broad framework for co-operation between the two countries. Indeed the objectives are so open-ended that practically any development project however – through NORAD or Norwegian NGOs – could be justified under any one of its four headings. The formulations regarding geographical focus are also unclear to the point of including everything. In sum, even if NORAD had wished to co-ordinate the activities of the Norwegian NGOs and NORAD's development

policy in Nicaragua, this would have been very difficult to achieve.

The *compartmentalised* division of responsibilities between MFA, NORAD's Regions Department, the Embassy in Managua, and the DCS also implies that nobody has had an overall picture of Norwegian Development Co-operation with Nicaragua. In other words, the responsibility for the co-ordination of all the public support to Nicaragua has not been squarely placed with one body.

Finally, co-ordination only makes sense if it involves a willingness to accept a measure of direction or steering of activities towards common objectives. When NNGOs rely upon public support, one of the fundamental issues is whether they should tolerate a measure of co-ordination, or whether they should guard their autonomy. In the context of Norwegian Development Co-operation, the belief that the NGOs should maintain their identity, independence and uniqueness is a firmly rooted principle. This is reflected in the fact that Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua have been able to obtain consistently large programme and project funding, as long as it was in line with the 1994 Guidelines for NGO-support and the overall principles of Norwegian development

assistance. In respect of greater co-ordination, current Norwegian Development Practice is largely benign.

The evidence is clear that Norwegian public support to Nicaragua relies heavily on NNGOs in terms of overall profile and image. NNGOs are able to broaden the base of this support, to give it a strong sense of direction and purpose in relation to the country's terrible problems and also to give it a more "human face" away from the impersonal nature of debt relief and balance of payments support. Indeed, without the work of the NNGOs and their Partners, Norwegian bilateral aid in Nicaragua could well go largely unnoticed. In many respects it is possible that Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua is dependent on the work of NNGOs to implement its strategy although, given our limited inquiries into the bilateral aid programme, we cannot be categorical on this point. Certainly the NNGOs collectively have both a relatively high and respected profile in Nicaragua and this can only help to strengthen perceptions generally of the usefulness of Norwegian public support. Indeed it could be argued that it is the collective effort of a small number of the larger NNGOs, with deep roots and extensive networks in the country, who, to a large extent, provide the public face of Norwegian public support.

4 The Performance of Norwegian NGOs as Development Agencies in Nicaragua: 1994–99

A major dimension of this evaluation has been an assessment of the Norwegian NGOs (NNGOs), in conjunction with their Nicaraguan Partner NGO (NICNGO), in terms of a number of key variables of their development performance. In this respect we must stress that we were *not* evaluating the individual NNGO-supported projects that we studied and visited but using them as the means to assess overall NNGO performance as development actors. This has not been a straightforward task given the fact that, in many instances, the NNGO Partner has multiple donor support and it was impossible, in the time available, to differentiate the NNGO support from that of other international NGOs or bilateral donors. Essentially in seeking to assess overall NNGO performance we undertook a number of tasks:

- The analysis of project documentation
- Visits to project sites
- Direct and focused discussions with both the NNGO and its Partner NICNGO

In such an intense and logistically demanding exercise, it is not always possible to achieve the optimum with each NNGO, NICNGO or project visited and, in some instances, our data and information were not always complete. However, overall we feel that we were able to cover sufficient ground with the NNGO-supported project practice to be able to extrapolate some broad findings in relation to the key variables of performance.

Our assessment of NGO project performance began with an ex-ante analysis of project documentation in relation to the key variables that we were exploring. In this respect we

should emphasise that the projects studied are illustrative as opposed to representative of the total universe of NNGO supported projects in Nicaragua. However, given that we have included projects from the major NNGO actors in Nicaragua, we feel confident that our matrix is a good indication of NNGO project performance. We undertook the ex-ante analysis *before* we either met with the NGOs or visited a project. The purpose of this ex-ante analysis was to assess to what extent performance was built around these critical variables and whether they were, or were not, a feature of the regular project monitoring and reporting by the NNGOs. We asked the NNGOs to provide us with the following documentation on the projects that were included in our matrix:

- Original project proposal
- More recent annual or six-monthly reports
- The texts of any formal evaluations
- Any other relevant studies on project performance

Apart from a misunderstanding of the Evaluation Team in respect of one project, generally on each of the projects included in our matrix we received an adequate amount of documentation on which to base our ex-ante analysis. Basically this involved the fairly rapid screening of project documentation for evidence or references in relation to the key performance variables. At the end of the review of each set of project documents we scored the content on a range of 0–3 for each of the key variables. The following table represents the **consolidated scores** – assuming a normal distribution of individual scores – for the 15 projects included in the project matrix:

Ex-Ante Qualitative Assessment of Key Variables in Project Documentation

Efficiency	Effective-ness	Impact	Sustain-ability	Gender	Poverty	M&E	Democrati-sation	Participation
1.35	2.1	1.4	1.8	1.7	1.2	1.2	1.5	1.7

- 3: Good Discussion and Analysis
- 2: Limited Discussion and Analysis
- 1: References Only in the Text
- 0: No References or Discussion

This ex-ante analysis was useful in terms of an initial understanding of the possible parameters of project performance. However, as we were *not* evaluating the 15 projects *per se* and as the quantity and quality of the project documentation varied considerably across the projects, we have presented consolidated scores that give an indication of the general level of discussion and analysis of key variables of project performance. This is not a scientific exercise but, interestingly, the “broad picture” was largely confirmed during the overall evaluation exercise. The project documentation was generally stronger on issues relating to “effectiveness”, “sustainability”, gender’ and “participation”. It was less strong on the issues of “impact” and “democratization” and it was generally weak on “efficiency”, “poverty focus” and monitoring and evaluation. Overall the scores indicate positive engagement with several of these key variables at the reporting stage of the project cycle. Given the heavy quantitative bias of this reporting, this suggests that several of the NNGOs and their Partners are seeking to broaden the analysis of their projects’ performance and not merely reporting on activities and output.

On the basis of the above ex-ante documentation analysis we proceeded both to visit the projects involved, to discuss their performance with NNGO and NICNGO staff and also, where appropriate, with a number of project beneficiaries. We present below our consolidated findings on performance in relation to the key variables.

4.1 Relevance of project interventions

The first question must concern the general thrust of NNGO involvement in Nicaragua in terms of how this relates to “development

needs” at both local and national levels. However, in a country like Nicaragua that is regarded as the second poorest in the hemisphere, any coherent development intervention that is broadly aimed at improving the livelihoods of its people would be seen as relevant. Furthermore such is the extent of the poverty and such the deep social and political divisions in the country, that it is difficult to talk in terms of “national needs” since any view will depend on one’s political perspective. Similarly the formal structures of government down to the municipal level are all mostly resource-poor and unable to take many initiatives in terms of local development apart from maintaining basic infrastructure and services. The “needs” at this level are multiple and specific to particular socio-economic groups: for example, the landless, smallholders, urban poor and the destitute. But as the needs are multiple so are the donors, their programmes and their strategies. Such is the frenetic nature of development initiatives in Nicaragua, it is hard to argue that they are all coherently addressing relevant problems and issues that collectively would help to alleviate the poverty of its people. In many instances the “relevance” of many development projects as a whole in Nicaragua may well have given way to the need to spend the aid budgets of the international donor community!

Overall the projects in the matrix fall into five basic project areas:

Targeting the needs of specific groups – children, youth, women and ethnic minority groups – with actions that are designed to ensure that their particular needs are addressed in a manner that gives them some prospect of development. Of these groups, children and women are more consistently targeted and usually to good effect (SAIH, RB, NPA)

Promoting a framework for reconciliation within Nicaraguan society still deeply divided after the conflicts of the 1980s, and also one that respects and gives importance to human rights. Even in the context of all-pervading poverty, many Nicaraguans feel that efforts must be made to

build a more just and fair society in their country (NCA, NPA)

Increasing the resources available to poor groups via such initiatives as **agricultural production, credit schemes and income generating activities** (NPA, CARE, LAHF). These are always the more difficult of projects to promote since, unless they are to be supported endlessly, they struggle to function in hostile economic environments and find it difficult to generate the momentum that carries them to break-even.

Promoting the development of appropriate organisations at the community level that could serve as a basis for continuing action and involvement in self-directed development. Most of the NNGOs and their Partners support this basic initiative and see such organisations as the only means of re-dressing the gross institutional imbalances in terms of access to resources and power.

Providing basic services as a means of ensuring that excluded groups – children and youth – have access at crucial moments to what they need in order to develop.

Such a cross-section of actions to meet a range of needs is not unexpected and would suggest that the NNGOs cover a broad area and do not focus on just one or two crucial needs. Clearly also many of the projects address multiple needs, combining a target group, with an emphasis on organisation and some kind of income generating activity. Furthermore the greater part of NNGO activity is in the Northern/Central regions of the country, reflecting the concentration of population in those regions. This inevitably raises the question of the inclusion of the two major Autonomous Regions along the Atlantic Coast – in which only SAIH of the NNGOs works – but it is not an issue that many of the NNGOs seem ready to address. While we have not done a detailed content analysis of *all* NNGO-supported development projects in Nicaragua in the past decade, it would appear that they *are* broadly spread with the result that any impact is

correspondingly similar. It is a broad portfolio of activities in which one could see much merit. But it similarly raises the issue of whether a greater collective focus could achieve a greater impact in terms of Norwegian aid?

We should note several issues related to other dimensions of “relevance”. In the first instance, few of the projects studied – apart from those directed at children that benefit from extensive research support nationally – contained a detailed contextual analysis by which we might be able to feel more confident that this was the right response to the problem being addressed. Coupled with this is the general limited nature of monitoring and evaluation activities that would help us to track the continuing relevance of the project in relation to changing situations. Furthermore, relevance has also to do with approach and methodology. In this respect, we must raise doubts about the approach of CARE to promoting small farmer development with heavy investments in services that cannot be sustained; and the LAHF for an approach that appears not to build on local knowledge and practice. In a sample of our size we would expect to find some project interventions that were questionable in terms of their method of implementation. While project NC 8 appears an example of unfortunate inexperience, the case of CARE is somewhat more serious given the fact that NORAD has consistently supported a project at considerable annual cost when an examination of its methodology might have raised doubts about the relevance of its approach. Having said that, however, we must not detract from the real benefits that the CARE project has brought to rural communities and to the dedication of its staff. But at NOK 24.6 m. over six years it has been an expensive luxury.

Finally, in terms of both Norwegian Aid Policy and the development priorities of Nicaragua – in the broadest sense – we found little evidence that current NNGO support is inconsistent with aims in these two areas. In relation to the former, a NNGO project proposal is assessed during the appraisal stage in terms of its relevance to official aid policy. Second, the Norwegian Embassy in Nicaragua comments

on the “relevance” of a proposal in relation to national development needs and priorities. Both of these “filters” appear to be working effectively and appear to weed out those proposals that clearly are inconsistent with either set of priorities. As we have already stated, given the endemic nature of poverty in Nicaragua, any broadly focused development intervention that addresses a problem related to this poverty can hardly fail to be “relevant”; the more important issues arise once it is implemented.

4.2 Efficiency and effectiveness of the projects

The twin issues of the “efficiency” and the “effectiveness” of NGO supported development initiatives are ones of current concern among a number of bilateral and multilateral donors and yet also ones that are quite elusive in terms of concrete judgements. Furthermore with NGO supported projects we are often talking in terms of from small to relatively modest financial support in comparison with bilateral donations. In this respect the margin for inefficiencies is usually quite limited and regular accounting procedures and “monitoring” visits reduce opportunities for negligent expenditure. As can be seen from Table 1 few of the NNGO-supported projects in Nicaragua in the 1990s could be classified as “major”, apart from NC 5, 9 and 12, but in each of these cases the support has been extended over periods from 6 to 11 years. On the basis of the evidence available we have estimated that the smallest annual grant given was **NOK 310,000** (NC 3) and the largest was **NOK 3.4 million** (NC 12), although NC 10 represents substantial support over a short period of time. We are not arguing that issues of efficiency and effectiveness are not relevant for projects of such relatively annual modest inputs. But we would suggest that, given the project appraisal system and the careful mechanisms of financial control, we would not expect to find many examples of an inefficient use of project inputs, of an inability to meet basic objectives or of negligent or excessive expenditure in relation to output.

Overall our basic assumptions seem to have been borne out by our findings. In terms of the efficiency of the projects studied it was encouraging to note that the issue was on the agenda of several of the NICNGOs: NC 9, 10 and 13. More generally, however, the issue of “efficiency” simply did not appear as a variable that NNGOs used in their monitoring or assessment of the projects that they supported. Furthermore, in several instances the issue of efficiency has been confused with that of effectiveness in terms of delivering expected output. A development agency, of course, could be highly cost-efficient in its use of available resources but their use may not be particularly effective. Apart from two examples our studies revealed a generally acceptable relationship of costs to output even though we were not able to “scientifically” prove the relationship. NICNGOs generally have modest facilities, acceptable systems of financial monitoring, seem to be able to squeeze the maximum out of their resources and use volunteers as a means of boosting their ability to deliver output. Furthermore many of the larger NICNGOs have multiple donors – NC 6, 9 and 10 – and it is impossible to differentiate out the efficiency of the Norwegian input.

In only two projects – NC 8 and 15 – were there any suggestions that resources may not have been used efficiently, but only on NC 8 did the case look strong. Furthermore, it is a pity that the 1996 evaluation of NC 12 did not address the efficiency of such a big project; hopefully the 2000 evaluation will do so. With an overall expenditure in excess of NOK 25 million inevitably issues of efficiency are raised, particularly with respect to the (a) the practice of individual extension support; (b) the relatively limited coverage and the cost per beneficiary; (c) the lack of any clear proven evidence of impact; and (d) an exit strategy that does not appear to be founded on proven achievements. Finally we should note another major dimension of efficiency that concerns the work of some NNGOs with government bodies. While no formal evidence was presented, there was a strong suggestion that perhaps government bodies were less concerned with

“efficiencies” in terms of the use of resources and that output did not always relate favourably to expenditure.

In terms of effectiveness our findings are less conclusive and point to a rather mixed bag in terms of performance and problems. Nicaragua is a donor-saturated environment with multiple demands being made on what is essentially a limited human and physical infrastructure. In these circumstances it is remarkable that some of the more involved NICNGOs are able to deliver effectively across a range of competing demands. Essentially our findings across 14 projects reveal four areas or levels of performance in terms of effectiveness:

the more specific and quantitative the objective – for example, Support for Handicapped Children or Training Workshops – the stronger was the evidence of coherence of approach and, hence, effectiveness (NC 2 and 4);

The larger the NICNGO and the broader and more qualitative the objective, the evidence suggested difficulties related to focus, coherence and ability to meet quite demanding targets (NC 9). In this respect, however, we are *not* suggesting that these NICNGOs are ineffective: more that coherence and focus appear to become blurred;

Projects where severe external constraints impede the effectiveness of their operations (NC 8). While listing distinctive achievements in terms of land legalisation and the increased participation of women in credit co-operatives, an evaluation of this project attributed the difficulties of achieving institutional strengthening to external factors in the agricultural sector;

The link between effectiveness and the availability of substantial resources: project NC 12 has been able to deliver consistent technical and other support to small farmer families as a result of the large volume of human and material resources available. In other words, the volume of resources ensured effective delivery of output.

Our general conclusion is that most of the projects studied were able to produce quantitatively verifiable evidence of their output in relation to expected targets. It is probable that some of the larger NICNGOs experience periodic difficulties in effective performance monitoring and may become over-extended in relation to what they can realistically deliver. Where a NNGO is present in the country – NC 4, 5, 6 – then careful monitoring by programme staff usually ensures that objectives are kept clearly in focus. Where a NNGO is not represented in the country and where a NICNGO is subject to pressures from several donors, then matters become more complicated. But overall there is an acceptable level of effective output in relation to the purposes for which NNGO funds were given.

4.3 Development impact

The search for development impact becomes ever more urgent and yet with most development practice the concept remains elusive due to systems that either do not encourage or actually impede its effective assessment. In this respect NNGOs are in the same boat as much of the “development community” where an aggressive demand for proven results is far more influential than any search for immediate or longer-term impact. Inevitably the whole “reporting system” that was common to most of the projects studied is predicated on this demand and can be so dominant that it leaves little time for longer-term analysis. NNGOs and their NICNGO Partners are locked into a system that they didn’t design but to which they conform as a condition of receiving support from NORAD or from a NNGO. Even the evaluations and several other studies that we consulted produced little evidence of impact that was based on accurate monitoring. Simply we found few examples of even a minimum system of impact monitoring nor indeed of continuous project monitoring other than the detailing of activities and the quantifying of results.

But in the above general picture of a lack of clear engagement with the notion of project

impact, we did find lots of encouraging evidence of immediate and long-term impact on several of the projects studied (NC 1, 6, 10, 13, 14). On these projects we found evidence of attempts to engage with the concept of impact that included lists of Impact Indicators and proposals for studying the impact of the project in more detail. In many cases, however, these commitments do not appear to have been carried through, in some cases due to extensive and probably unmanageable lists of indicators. More specifically several of the NICNGOs argue with justification that there was clear evidence that many years of work on a particular issue had finally had a noticeable impact. Projects such as NC 3, 4, 6, 10 and 12 all reported impact in areas as diverse as “children’s rights”, “increasing social awareness”, “more effective democratic practices”, “policy influence” and agricultural production even if they have not been able to formally record them in their reporting. This situation was confirmed in several of the project visits where we saw situations in which clearly output had moved to effect and sustained benefits had been achieved. This was particularly the case with social welfare projects. More specifically the impact of project NC 1 is clearly discernible:

Generally there is, therefore, growing evidence that NNGO-supported projects are trying to come to terms with the concept of impact. When asked, almost all of the NNGOs and NICNGOs could identify what they felt had been the 2–3 major impacts of their work over the past decade although, as we have seen, the evidence is anecdotal and not proven. However, there is very little understanding of the issue of “negative impact” or of any suggestion that interventions might have adversely affected some poor people while benefiting others. Essentially the general situation is little different from that of many other development agencies. To date there have to date been few – if any – attempts to develop NNGO capacity to monitor or report on impact. Indeed the situation is slightly worrying in the sense that several of the NNGOs are beginning to experiment with the concept but readily concede that they have little capacity to carry

things forward. This has been the unfortunate case of NC 12 which has been unable to break out of a highly quantitative and aggregated approach to project reporting but never found the time – despite its many resources – to monitor the situation at community or family level. It is unfortunate after such massive expenditure that the project is closing with only anecdotal evidence of what sustainable impact it might have had.

4.4 Sustainability of project interventions

Within the broad reporting framework that governs the relationship between NNGOs and NORAD, the issue of sustainability is presented in four dimensions: **institutional, socio-cultural, ecological and financial**. In the first instance we feel that this is an understandable but somewhat demanding view of the concept that the majority of hard-pushed NICNGOs will find difficult to build into their project reporting systems. They may constitute a reasonable framework for a major long-term rural development project, for example, but they are not a manageable set of variables for NICNGOs implementing small projects and with multiple donors. It is for this reason that we did not find much discussion of the concept of “sustainability” in its many dimensions in the project literature or any substantial evidence that it is an operational concept at the project level. Most of the NNGOs and NICNGOs are aware of the importance of sustainability – although not always in such a broad sense – but most struggle understandably to turn it into an underlying operational principle of their development practice, even though they would like to do so.

During the evaluation we found lots of fragmented evidence of awareness of the critical importance of “sustainability”. We also found a number of initiatives to address the issue with some seriousness but, more generally, there was an air of resignation at an inability – for very understandable reasons – to build the concept more purposefully into their work. Several of the larger NNGOs – RB, NCA and NPA – have taken initiatives to raise the issue of

sustainability with their Partners. These initiatives have taken the form of workshops, specific information or assisting Partners to attend fund-raising courses with a view to securing the financial sustainability of their projects. Indeed in most of the discussions on the issue it was the notion of financial sustainability that was at the core of NICNGO concern. For example, with project NC 4 the concern was to try and consolidate the basic structure of community rehabilitation that was already in place and to at least try and secure this minimum infrastructure; for NC 6 an issue was to try and convince donors to “think big” and to move beyond small annual contributions and thus give the NGO an opportunity to develop its resources. Inevitably we found examples of differing degrees of dependence of several projects on NNGOs support – NC 4, 7, 8 – but such situations are a fact of life for many smaller NGOs and there was evidence also that projects such as NC 4 are effectively grappling with this situation.

On the other hand, in terms of financial sustainability we found that the larger NICNGOs – NC 6, 10, 12 – appeared to have a more secure grip on the issue and, given their relatively large turnovers, were able to create a critical mass of resources that would allow them to maintain the overall momentum of their work. More specifically the big NC 12 project has had to address the issue of sustainability head-on, given CARE Norway’s decision to withdraw from the project. In this respect the project’s strategy has been to emphasise in its final two years the strengthening of seven local co-operative structures that would form the basis of the sustained development of the work over a period of seven years. Clearly the strategy is based as much on hope as on any confidence that the co-operatives will be able to survive in a region dominated by subsistence agriculture, in a political context that does not favour co-operative associations and with *no* institutional forms of technical support available.

There is evidence that several of the NICNGO Partners are seeking more effectively to ensure the sustainability of their project interventions.

For some of the smaller NGOs – NC 8, 13 – sustainability is seen very much in human resource terms and the investment in human capital as a means of ensuring a pool of qualified Nicaraguans to contribute to development initiatives. In this focus training and direct knowledge transfer become the key ingredients of approach and, given the limited nature of resources available, it is a highly plausible strategy. Other Partners like NC 4 are seeking to build up networks of volunteers and to engage local communities more directly in maintaining local facilities as a means of ensuring their sustainability. Furthermore, in terms of promoting concern for Human Rights NC 2 has sought to quickly develop a critical mass of awareness of Human Rights among the local population also as a means of ensuring that the work will continue should the funding cease. Another example – NC 1 – is trying to broaden its financial base via regular contributions but such a strategy is highly vulnerable in a resource-poor economy:

It is a mixture of primarily financial sustainability and, to a less degree, the sustainability of development momentum that largely dominates current thinking on sustainability among most NNGOs and NICNGOs in Nicaragua. Less conspicuous is a strategy that approaches the issue from an organisational perspective. In this respect we have seen a concern of some NICNGOs for training and knowledge transfer as a means of strengthening the human resource base of their organisations. Another way of looking at the issue of sustainability in the context of NICNGOs is that of identifying the degree to which they are investing in organisational development – internal functioning, programme performance and relationships with other similar organisations as a basis for building networks and alliances. However it would appear that this more integrated concept of sustainability has yet to take hold among the NNGOs and NICNGOs. The central focus of their attentions is still on just one component of the sustainability – the financial foundation of their operations. We sensed that those involved realise that it is essentially a limited approach

without explicit consideration of how other factors relate to sustainability: for example, the capacity to measure programme performance, communicate clearly about success, invest in alliances, ensure credibility and constantly pay attention to internal consolidation. However, the thinking and initiatives that we found on the subject of sustainability are encouraging and NNGOs might be able to support their Nicaraguan Partners in broadening their perspectives encouraged us.

4.5 Promoting the position of women

In the past decade or so development practice has been increasingly seeking to move on from a strategy that, at a minimum, sought to target women with certain of the supposed benefits of development projects to a strategy with a more explicit **gender** focus. In this respect the larger NNGOs are moving in the direction of outlining their strategies on the promotion of greater gender equality in their development practice. However, it would appear that only NPA has actually published a Policy Paper on Gender (1999) with the purpose of mainstreaming a gender focus in its development practice. Understandably this has yet to feed through to the practice although staff appear quite familiar with the Policy's focus. On the other hand, CARE Nicaragua (NC 12) has prepared an operational document for promoting a gender policy within the context of its PAS project. Furthermore, RB in Nicaragua is currently planning to strengthen its gender focus in its next strategic plan for the period 2002–05. The whole language and practice of RB would appear sensitive to developing stronger gender awareness with children at a young age via education and curriculum development so as to build the basis for more positive and equal gender relations in the future. On the other hand NCA, given the community that it represents, appears not to have yet turned its attention to gender issues as it so clearly has to other dimensions of its development practice. NCA has openly acknowledged this situation at an institutional level and has built up a consistent dialogue with its Nicaraguan Partners on the subject, although largely in

terms of training for women or activities designed to improve their living standards, rather than an integrated gender focus in their development strategies. Finally it would appear that none of the smaller NNGOs has addressed the issue of “gender” in any strategic way although clearly aware of the concept and conscious of its importance as a means of fundamentally strengthening the position of women.

At the NICNGO level we must be sensitive to the fact that, while for many of the NNGOs' Partners “gender” is an issue that they seek to promote in a balanced way, they cannot always give a gender perspective the attention that it merits. Generally at the NNGO Partner level we found a willingness to engage in discussion on the topic and a frankness about efforts to take a more strategic gender perspective. In this respect our evidence is full of examples of deliberate efforts to direct project benefits at women (NC 12), to train them (NC 10), to promote women's organisations (NC 1) and also to try and achieve a greater gender balance internally within their own organisations (NC 7, 9). On this latter point, however, the real effect might be less than the encouraging statistics in the sense of increasing female representation in lower echelons of management but not at the top level. In this respect church-based organisations face a stiffer up-hill battle given the domination of their churches by men. But within this generally positive recognition of women's position, we did find some practices that suggested that there is still a lot to be done. These were situations in which, rather belatedly, project management had come to realise the clear imbalance in terms of both women and men benefiting from project activities and took remedial action (NC 8, 13).

Clearly greater awareness of and sensitivity towards a gender perspective has entered the development practice of most NNGO Partners in Nicaragua even if none has a fully integrated gender strategy. But then how much development practice in the world is guided by such a strategy? In the promotion of such a strategy two ingredients are still missing:

More clearer institutional statements on Gender Policy translated into practical guidelines on how to begin to develop such a strategy at the project level; the lack of such statements and guiding notes are very evident and hold back a more concerted effort to promote a gender perspective;

Some basic tools that would allow project staff to monitor progress in promoting a gender perspective other than a purely quantitative one. Currently RB, for example, desegregates its statistics in terms of girls and boys but little else in terms of monitoring any advances in its efforts to promote gender awareness among children. At this moment none of the NNGOs' Partners are in a position to monitor any work that they might do to promote a gender perspective as opposed to merely counting the number of women involved in project activities.

Overall the NNGOs are promoting the participation of women in terms of their access to benefits and resources. There is less evidence that they have yet come firmly to terms with strengthening the position of women in relation to power and its use in their communities.

4.6 Promoting stakeholder participation

By this term we mean the approach to development practice that has come to be called "participatory development". In other words, this refers to a style of project intervention that is not wholly based on top-down delivery but that seeks consciously to involve local people in the project process. A "participatory approach" has come to be seen as ethically and operationally the soundest way to implement development projects.

Given the approach to this evaluation we did *not* spend a lot of time at each of the projects visited and so were unable to see much evidence of a "participatory process" unfolding before us. It is almost impossible to make confident judgements on processes that are supposed to constitute the basis of project operations on short visits. However we were able to review the

documentation and assess any material therein that referred to the approach to project implementation. We also raised the issue with NICNGO staff and listened to their explanations of how they involve people in the project. And we did have the chance to talk to local people and hear first-hand of several mechanisms by which they become active participants in project activities. Project NC 10, for example, has produced a Handbook on Participatory Planning for its staff; while there were others examples (NC 3, 7, 12) of projects that had set up local structures to facilitate people's involvement. Generally we gained the impression that most of the NNGOs' Partners sought as much as possible – and in many instances guided by the need to involve local volunteers as a means of ensuring project sustainability – to promote effective local involvement in project activities. There were, however, a number of examples where we felt that the principles of participatory project practice had not yet quite filtered through and where even slightly paternalistic attitudes persisted. But these were the minority; on most of the projects there was solid evidence that local people's involvement was actively promoted.

We can confirm a general commitment to the principle of "participatory development" and a familiarity with several of the methods and techniques used in its promotion. For several NNGOs – NCA, NPA and RB, for example – "participation" lies at the heart of their project practice and many of their staff are easily familiar with its language. NCA in particular has been most active in seeking the participation of its Partners in debates around key programmatic themes and in the development of strategies to address them. Furthermore RB has been active in introducing the notion of Children's Participation in the context of development initiatives:

Both the NNGOs and their Partners are solidly in tune with what we could call "bottom-up" development and in one or two cases – NC 3, 6,10 – may be at the cutting-edge. But more generally the principle appears to be sound and

the practice largely dependent on the actors involved and the long-term view that the project is able to take. However, participation for most of the projects visited is essentially a means for both effective intervention and sustainability. Most of the projects had yet to move to the next stage in which community participation becomes an issue of ownership.

4.7 Supporting democratisation

The processes involved in supporting democratisation are clearly linked to the above issue of participation. Active participation in the full sense of the term can often be a natural springboard for involvement in wider movements for social change. In the 1990s the notion of “democratisation” became part of the mantra of correct development practice. Indeed it invariably forms one of the planks of the official aid policy of bilateral agencies including NORAD. In this respect “democratisation” became one of the “conditions” for receiving official aid as a means whereby fundamental changes could be linked to packages of technical assistance. Democratisation was seen at the official level more in terms of electoral processes and their opening up to wider political forces. Since the 1960s many international NGOs have sought to promote democratic pressures for radical social change. This is a conscious strategy that helps to mould the very nature of development intervention and seeks to build links and alliances as a means of strengthening community bases.

For the major NNGOs who have been working in Nicaragua for over a decade “democratisation” has come to replace “solidarity” as one of the basic driving forces of their work with their Nicaraguan Partners. With the fall of the Sandinista regime in 1990, the task became to defend the interests of the Nicaragua’s rural and urban poor in the face of the economic onslaught that accompanied the structural adjustments of the early 1990s. In this respect the NNGOs adjusted their own strategies and determined to defend the interests of those whom they suspected would lose out under the new regime. For example NPA’s Country

Strategy stresses three main priorities – **(a) local development, (b) organisational strengthening and (c) the promotion and defence of human rights**. While other NNGOs may not have formulated these aims in any explicit way, we would suggest that they broadly resemble their “democratising” aims in Nicaragua. For example, CARE sees its PAS project (NC 12) as both one of helping to develop subsistence agriculture but, equally importantly, of developing local structures that could permit subsistence farming families to become more proactive in seeking solutions to their problems. Furthermore, emphasis is also put on the critical role of democratisation in the on-going process of reconciliation in a country that has deeply entrenched internal political and social divisions. However it does not appear that the concept of citizenship, with its concern for the exercise of citizen’s rights and duties within the framework of the Nicaraguan State, is as yet a main thrust of the work of NNGOs in Nicaragua. Certainly we found little evidence that NNGO Partners were actively facilitating debates and reflection around these issues.

The majority of the projects studied had strong undercurrents of the above three processes of democratisation. In this respect we must recognise that several of the NNGOs Partners – *CEPAD*, *CIEETS*, *Desafios* and *Dos Generaciones* – are major actors in broader social movements in Nicaragua and the process of democratisation is implicit – if not always explicit – in their whole development ethos. Particularly strong are the concerns to develop local level organisations and *poder local* and these two aims appear to run right through most of their actions. However, in order to put moves towards greater democratisation into clearer perspective, we should note that such processes take place against a background of quite strong traditions of authoritarian rule within popular organisations. Nonetheless the NICNGOs, as part of wider Civil Society, constitute an alternative democratic force in the country and appear to be ever vigilant to maintain this role.

As with other qualitative processes, it has not been possible, both due to a lack of time but more importantly to a lack of monitoring, to accurately assess the progress of NNGO support for democratisation in Nicaragua. Indeed it might be an almost impossible question to answer given the multiplicity of actors and stakeholders. However we can confirm that several of the NICNGOs that NNGOs support are to the fore in promoting and defending the rights and interests of Nicaragua's poor, that there is much innovative practice and some "success" particularly at the municipal level. The main indicator that we have is the track record to date of the NICNGOs concerned. This is largely unexplored territory for both NNGOs and their Partners and few – apart from perhaps NICNGOs like CIEETS, *Dos Generaciones* and *Desafíos* – would appear to have the experience or resources to begin to develop an effective mechanism for tracking "democratisation" processes. In this respect NNGOs like NCA, NPA and RB could usefully seek to give a lead.

4.8 The fight against poverty

The fieldwork for this evaluation coincided with the latest international report on the state and nature of poverty in Nicaragua that largely reinforced what is common knowledge: 82% of the population live in poverty and 44% on less than US\$1 per day. Furthermore our meeting with a group of Key Informants on the issue of poverty in Nicaragua and strategies to combat it confirmed the despair that Nicaraguans feel at the magnitude of the challenge of poverty reduction and of the powerful and entrenched forces that perpetuate it. It is common knowledge that both the Nicaraguan government and the national effort to improve the lives of the poor are largely sustained by international co-operation. And yet despite this massive influx of resources, the statistics remained unchanged in 2000. In this situation the majority of international NGOs continue to work "at the margins" alleviating the worst excesses of poverty in localised pockets but sometimes also achieving a broader impact.

NNGOs' strategies fall within the broad NORAD objective of poverty alleviation. In this respect most of the development projects supported by NNGOs could be classified as fitting generally within this objective. In a country of such endemic poverty, any coherent and targeted intervention should have *some* effect on people's livelihoods in the short term even if it may not fundamentally alter the root causes of their poverty. While poverty alleviation is implicit, if not explicit, in almost all of the work of NNGOs in Nicaragua, it would appear that none of them has an explicit "strategy" of poverty alleviation, and this is an issue that perhaps they need to address. A problem with such strategies is that they are invariably couched in the broadest of terms and usually add up to little more than declarations of commitment to "poverty alleviation" on the basis of a number of general strategic interventions. Indeed most NNGOs tend not to think of their development practice in terms of poverty even though there is ample evidence of positive, and in some instances possible negative, effect. Only in NCA and CARE did we find explicit evidence that their work was seen within the context of "poverty alleviation". However, the range of current NNGO supported development actions suggests that they potentially alleviate poverty across a number of fronts. On the tangible side, agricultural production, credit schemes, access to land and basic health and education service provision all potentially help to alleviate the symptoms of poverty in Nicaragua. On the more structural side, the support to their Nicaraguan Partners involved in broader societal movements – children's rights, building of local organisations and *incidencia* in policy discussions – are all part of the continual pressure that civil society groups seek to bring on the entrenched structures and the lack of a national political commitment to mount a serious attack on poverty. Most NNGOs and their Partners are sanguine enough to realise the enormous national and external factors that sustain poverty in Nicaragua and of the real dangers of institutionalising a state of affairs that would perpetuate the misery and condemn generations of Nicaraguan to lives of poverty.

In Nicaragua the poverty of the many sustains the livelihoods of the few

Most of the development work that NNGOs currently support in Nicaragua is generally worthy and can be seen as contributing to the alleviation of poverty, there is a clear need to tighten up the NNGOs' understanding of the concept and to build it more systematically into the analysis of their practice. If poverty alleviation – or “poverty reduction” – lies at the heart of NNGOs' explicit strategies in the country, then they need to be more consistent in using poverty alleviation as a framework against which to assess progress. We would suggest that the NNGOs could examine their development work in Nicaragua in relation to poverty alleviation from several perspectives:

The balance between direct, tangible benefits that can help alleviate poverty and the need to address – where possible and at the appropriate level – some of the more structural factors that perpetuate the poverty. Such a balance may not always be possible but NNGOs should seek to build it into *all* of the development work that they support. It is largely a question of “scaling-up” both the analysis and the nature of the intervention to try and build in an element that does address – where feasible – these broader issues

The clear need to assess whether any development intervention *is* alleviating the poverty of the poorest – a difficult concept in Nicaragua – or unwittingly strengthening those who are not the poorest. This is, of course, a very thin dividing line in a situation of such endemic poverty. But there is often the tendency to “support the supportable” and this can have consequences for those at the bottom of the heap. We are not suggesting that this currently is a major issue but we feel that it may be occurring and the NNGOs are not picking it up.

What could the NNGOs who currently work in Nicaragua *collectively* do in terms of addressing some of the major external factors that aggravate Nicaragua's poverty? NNGOs with their Partners have both a detailed

understanding of and considerable information on the nature and dynamics of poverty in Nicaragua and they could consider ways in which they could use this base to influence these external factors. Perhaps a starting point would be a collective analysis and review of the options to see if such an approach is realistic.

Trying to specifically identify the impact on poverty of the NNGOs is operationally an impossible task and we accept that most – if not all – of the project work is ultimately directed at this objective. But it is important to try and explain outcomes within this framework. Understandably NNGOs and their Partners will say that they don't have the time or the resources to undertake such a task; and they will be right. The implication is that – as with other dimensions of NNGO involvement in Nicaragua – it is time to reduce the burden of repetitive and quantitative project reporting and allow some space for some of these broader and crucial aims to be assessed. There are clearly thousands of women, men and children whose lives have been improved by the support of NNGOs and their Partners. It would be useful if these achievements could be more accurately monitored so as to be confident that the benefits are reaching those for whom they are intended. Like other international NGOs, NNGOs and their Partners continually seek to stop a desperate situation from getting worse: they provide services that nobody else could provide and some hope of a better future. Many accept the contradictions of their role of “not letting the pot boil over” and few contemplate withdrawal and allowing internal forces and processes of social change to take their course. That would be a tough decision.

4.9 Concluding comment

Given the history of their involvement, the quality of many of their Partners and the lengthy substantial presence of several Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua, we were not surprised to find a generally acceptable level of project performance. The annual project agreements, the careful financial monitoring and the experienced cadre of NICNGO staff, all

combine to ensure a minimum of effective performance at the project level. The projects studied represent, in most cases, solid professional development practice that largely bring some immediate benefit to those whom they target, even if we are unsure of how far they may have helped to tackle the root problem. In a country like Nicaragua such immediate benefits are almost certainly most welcomed by the poor who may not have the luxury to consider more long-term implications. Indeed it could be questioned whether a long-term perspective is realistic in the fundamental instability of Nicaraguan society. Immediate needs are at a premium – and these are clearly being met – but longer-term solutions must not be discounted completely. In this respect there appears to be a useful balance between both considerations, but with an increasing pull towards “immediate needs” in face of the persistent and debilitating poverty.

While this solid project practice is both welcome and necessary, what does the future hold? If we

were to return in ten years – assuming no cataclysmic social upheavals but probably some fluctuations in political power – would we find basically an extended version of today’s practice? Which NNGOs are planning new initiatives? Who is about to break out of the present mould of sound practice and take the risk of innovation? In other words, after some 20 years or more how can NNGOs collectively regenerate their batteries? We raise these questions as a way of suggesting that this can often be a useful exercise for a group of development agencies that live off the same source of support. At this moment there is no one body that is infusing NNGOs in Nicaragua with new ideas and leading the examination of current practice. The Norwegian Embassy cannot do it, NORAD appears not to want the role and so it is left to individual institutional decisions. Given the fact that around 40% of Norwegian public funds in Nicaragua passes through the NNGOs, a more concerted effort to reflect on collective practice might unearth new ideas and energies.

5 Critical Dimensions of Norwegian NGO Development Activities in Nicaragua

Most NNGOs, whether they be physically present in the country or not, would probably argue that their role is not merely that of a supporter of development projects. Most of those working in Nicaragua today would argue that they have a broader role and that they are in the country as development actors with a commitment to supporting not just immediate development initiatives but also broader processes of social change. Indeed some may see this as their principal role, using development projects as the means to stimulate actions to promote more fundamental change. In this respect we have examined several broader issues related to this broader role and we review them below:

5.1 Promoting partnership

NNGOs appear to have readily adopted the language of “partnership” in describing the way(s) in which they relate to the NICNGOs that they support. *Contrapartes* is a widely used term and most seem to recognise its broad implications even if these can often work out different in practice. For NICNGOs, however, the situation can easily become a nightmare since many have multiple donors, to all of whom they are potential partners! Indeed we sensed a certain reluctance to use the term, which is understandable. Partnership is a highly contested issue that has been driven by donors as a means of ensuring a more equal relationship in the aid chain and of emphasising issues such as organisational development and capacity building as well as project implementation. However, we must recognise that in Nicaragua of all countries there have been solid “partnerships” between NICNGOs and other NGOs long *before* the term became fashionable.

As a microcosm of development co-operation, the relations between NNGOs and NICNGOs would appear to cover most of the range of interpretations. NNGOs like NPA and RB have long-standing relationships with several

NICNGOs. NPA has recently sought to formalise these in terms of a Policy Statement on partnership; RB on the other hand has no formal mechanisms of partnership and indeed tends to use the term “collaboration”. Apart from CARE which implements its own project, other NNGOs do so in “partnership” with a Nicaraguan counterpart organisation. We asked both NICNGOs and NNGOs to characterise their partnership in terms of three alternatives:

- Shared vision, purpose and approach
- Good operational relationship
- Donor-recipient

We discussed the above three alternatives with most of the NNGOs and NICNGOs. The evidence was strong that most current “partnerships” are clearly of the second type, while some appear to have clear elements of the first type. The encouraging finding was that *none* of either the NICNGOs or the NNGOs felt that their “partnership” was entirely based on money.

On one side both NPA and RB appear to have built up very sound relationships with their Nicaraguan “partner” NGOs and positive noises were made on both sides. In discussions the more common terms associated with effective partnership were regularly cited: for example, “mutual respect”, trust, common vision and shared values. Furthermore mechanisms for effective collaboration and consultation appear to exist and there have been few major disagreements or breakdowns in the relationships over the years. However, daily life for both Partners is inevitably hectic and there is often not a lot of time for a more strategic relationship. It would appear that only NCA and CIEETS have transcended the hectic pace of project life and sought to forge a “partnership” based on shared values and religious beliefs. Indeed efforts by NCA to develop such initiatives as co-ordinated advocacy strategies and joint analysis with CIEETS have clearly taken their partnership to a higher level than

most. Similarly RB, with its distinctive focus on children, and NL with its focus on teachers, are better placed to extend their partnerships from the purely operational to the development of common positions and joint action; and SAIH has built up a mode of working with URACCAN that fosters mutual respect and genuine friendship.

At the other end of the continuum some “partnerships” has been less easy to develop. LAHF’s relations with MCN have gone through an extended period of stress that has led to remedial action on the part of LAHF which has now assumed a more dominant role. And SNV’s notion of partnership would appear to be a highly individualistic one in which it plays a quite forceful role. The SNV representative mentioned three primary factors that play an important role in building the partnership – control, follow-up (*seguimiento*) and advice or accompaniment (*asesoria*). These were expressed by actions such as ensuring clarity of “rules” and working with formal agreements; understanding the limits of each party and being available to provide advice. Attitude was a further key factor and was expressed in the building of mutual respect and being open for criticism.

In particular in the past few years the SNV has begun to strengthen partnership by taking a more long-term programme approach to its work – that allows for such things as organisational development and capacity building – as opposed to individual projects. Finally there is the distressing breakdown of the relationship between NCA and CEPAD. Animosity has taken the place of friendship and the rift may be terminal. It does not seem that there is any way out of this particular crisis at the moment.

Most of the NNGO Partners take a relaxed view of the relationship and generally they are complimentary of the positive and supportive manner of their Norwegian colleagues. Although the concern for “partnership” has been largely driven by international NGOs, NICNGOs appear generally to have recognised

the usefulness of the concept and have engaged positively. For some this has not demanded much effort since the relationship goes back more than a decade and is built on shared political beliefs and development perspective. For others “partnership” has been a challenge. Whatever their intrinsic beliefs and values NNGOs in Nicaragua are essentially donors and yet most manage to minimise the more negative aspects of this role and to effectively engage with their Nicaraguan colleagues in a spirit of a common shared task.

5.2 Capacity building

Capacity Building (CB) is such a broad concept that it is often difficult to distinguish its distinctive approach in any set of development interventions. Essentially CB refers to actions both to support and to help sustain processes of development and change from an intellectual, organisational, human resource, material and financial perspective. Within this framework of activities we can identify actions that:

- help to build the effectiveness and sustainability of development organisations
- take a more operational perspective in terms of developing skills and knowledge in different areas of development practice
- develop the strategic vision of development organisations

Ultimately we could link the notion of CB to “empowerment” and the ability of a development organisation to become a consistent and effective actor in its immediate and broader context.

Measured against the above framework, it is difficult to be categorical in relation to the work of NNGOs in Nicaragua over the past decade. This hesitancy is largely to do with both the multiplicity of donors with whom many NICNGOs deal and also the lack of any clear CB strategies that we could use as a basis of assessment. Certainly there are many activities that individually contribute to the “capacity” of NICNGOs: training, workshops, manuals, guides and so on. For some of the smaller

NNGOs such activities are probably the limit of their understanding of the term. Such activities are very welcome and probably have made their contribution to human resource development within the NICNGOs, but without a more systematic process based on an organisational assessment, they may not have the expected effect. Indeed some NNGOs appear to make assumptions about the levels of their Partners' skills, knowledge and organisational support that are already in place.

In terms of the bigger NNGOs the notion of CB is quite clearly on their agendas but not all of them have yet come to grips with the depth and implications of the term. Indeed none would appear to have a formal CB strategy in terms of a clearly visible plan of action, although RB has initiated a Programme of Organisational Development. Certainly we found no evidence that any of these NNGOs had undertaken organisational assessments with their Partners as the basis for determining an appropriate CB strategy. NCA has been very active in seeking to promote CB with its Partners and has developed a series of mechanisms that it has applied with its major Partners. While clearly going in the right direction, these have yet to converge into a coherent strategy. Indeed it was interesting to find one of NCA's major Partners – CIEETS – experimenting with its own approach to CB. Capacity Building must also be seen within the context of the continuing collapse of State capacity and the increasing need to work with strengthened local structures. Hence the emphasis in much NNGO work on the strengthening of local structures – municipal empowerment – as an urgent means of strengthening capacity at that level. This purpose runs through much of the practice that we visited and it is consistent, even though to date we lack firm evidence on the real outcomes of this work.

The lack of intelligible and clearly identifiable strategies of CB appears not to have gone unnoticed by several NNGO Partners. Many are experienced enough to understand issues of organisational development and to recognise that training and workshops do *not* by

themselves constitute a strategy of CB. None of the NNGOs has made a concerted effort to work with their Partners in terms of organisational strengthening. In many cases the reason may well be their own inexperience in such actions; but also project-overload leaves little time for the demands of a programme of organisational development. Project practice and reports still constitute the basis of NNGOs' relationships with their Partners and training and workshops are seen as mechanisms to ensure satisfactory performance. In this respect none of the NNGOs appears to have drawn back from the continual project practice in any substantial way and reflected on the organisational needs of their Partners. Social change is *not* just a function of development interventions. Crucially it is also a product of competent, skilful and focused organisations that can effectively drive the processes involved. NNGOs certainly seem to have recognised this proposition and the promotion of organisations to represent the interests of marginalised and excluded groups is a basic operational norm. But it is not just a question of promotion. Such organisations need consistent support to maintain their level of functioning, especially some of the larger NICNGOs that appear to be stretched to the limit in terms of their range of commitments.

5.3 Systems of monitoring and evaluation

In assessing current NNGO and Partner systems and approaches to the monitoring and evaluation (ME) of their projects, we had the opportunity to examine a substantial amount of project reports and evaluation documents that gave us a fairly detailed picture of the current state of play. Our initial documentary assessment confirmed the chain of reporting that dominates the lives of so many NNGO and Partner staff. As with most bilaterally supported NGOs, the NNGO-Partner chain in Nicaragua runs from NORAD-NNGO-NICNGO-other participating organisations. Given that the chain is common, there is a noticeable similarity in the timing, content and style of the reports. The exceptions are CARE that implements its own project and one or two NGOs that have begun to

experiment, particularly with the use of indicators. The whole chain is dominated by the NORAD(NNGO relationship that is based on annual agreements thus demanding that the cycle be completed every 12 months. Annual Plans, therefore, become substantial events. As inputs to these annual plans, projects prepare two six-monthly progress reports, four three-monthly financial reports and an annual auditor's report. This is the minimum package that may be added to as and when other needs arise. In general terms overall project documentation that should report on activities, effect and possible impact, has the following characteristics:

- lack of balance between narrative/analysis and factual reporting on project activities; indeed many reports rarely go beyond reporting on activities within the Log Frame
- repetitive in the sense of seemingly reporting same things in the same way each time
- over ambitious frameworks of indicators that are rarely operationalised or used to assess performance
- argely quantitative in their content

Certainly the chain is able to ensure a regular flow of project reporting and the NICNGOs put a lot of both time and energy into this continuous and endless task. It is all very important in terms of the current system of reporting, but we question whether it is necessary and, if not, what could be done?

Further investigations at the NNGO and Partner level tended to confirm our analysis of the project documentation. However, encouragingly, we found projects such as NC 9 and 10 actively experimenting with appropriate systems and in fact being more in the driving seat than their NNGO Partner. Both are seeking to set up PME systems and are clearly trying to move beyond the quantitative and to monitor some of the more qualitative processes in which they are involved. Furthermore we suspect that many of the Partners have developed useful approaches to "participatory evaluation" in the sense of consultations and discussions with

people at the project level and ongoing processes of dialogue with the groups with whom they are working. Otherwise, in the formal sense, most of the current practice of ME is essentially built around the continual flow of reports. And in order to prepare these reports there is an equally continual set of activities varyingly referred to as *seguimiento*, *asesoria*, *sondeo de opinion*, *sistematizacion* and *acompanamiento*. These terms describe the activities of both NICNGO and NNGO staff to follow a project's progress, to offer support where necessary and appropriate and to try and make sense out of multiple activities. In this respect, it must be said that the basic purpose of these activities is geared to reporting demands made on the NNGOs and as a way of ensuring that targets are met. It is a permanent grind that keeps considerable numbers of staff forever collecting data and writing reports, and yet there appears to be no alternative. Essentially, "reporting" has replaced "monitoring", targets are the key focus and indicators often abound but with little sense that have been accurately used. Indeed it is a state of affairs in which many NGO communities find themselves and the NNGOs and their Partners are no exception.

In response to this situation the NNGOs appear quite helpless. Few have had the opportunity to specialise in the theory and practice of ME. Furthermore the costs of ongoing ME are not built into budgets but included as external activities at prescribed times in the project proposal. Indeed external evaluations are the norm and, while many are very useful exercises of summarising observable progress to date, few are able to explore the broader parameters of social change. Basically we found *no* effective ME systems at either the NNGO or Partner level and indeed, in most cases, no structured approach to monitoring and evaluation at all. The whole situation is, of course, complicated by the fact that many NNGO Partners have multiple donors who could well make multiple demands. It is a nightmare situation that international NGOs in general seem unwilling to tackle head-on. The result is competent NGOs and their staff being overwhelmed with meeting the demands of their donors rather

than having the time to examine and understand processes of social change as they unfold. The NNGOs are in the same rut but fairly radical action would be required to get out of it.

5.4 NNGOs working with government

Historically NNGO support to Nicaragua has been built around the values and purposes of the Sandinista-lead revolution of 1979. This revolution became the springboard for increasing NNGO involvement in Nicaragua's development in the 1980s and has continued to be at the heart of the strategic vision of most NNGOs until the present day. However, we should underline NNGO independence from Nicaraguan political parties. Even with the change of government since 1990 the Sandinista legacy is still strong and has led to a generally critical attitude towards successive Liberal governments. In this respect the NNGOs do not stand in isolation but share a common platform with most of the international NGO community and the main body of emerging civil society institutions in the country. Indeed this critical attitude has not gone unnoticed. Nicaragua's Liberal governments since 1990 have been less ideologically at ease with the international NGO community as a whole and have sought to enforce stricter state control. It would appear, however, that these attempts to "control" the international NGO community have been stronger on paper than in practice. The reality is that, with over 100 international NGOs supporting development initiatives in the country and the heavy dependence of the country in general on international co-operation, there is a limit to the amount of enforcing that the Nicaraguan government can do. International NGOs operate at both departmental and municipal level throughout the country and, within the context of the government's own *Ley de Municipalidades*, are seeking to actively promote effective local control and power as a counterbalance to the centralising forces of the State. In the past decade, therefore, the level of contact between international NGOs and central government has noticeably decreased, while the contacts at

lower administrative levels have now become the basis of co-operation.

Of the NNGO-supported projects, the relationship with government at different levels was more evident in NC 3, 4, 5, 12 and 13. On the other hand several current NNGO Partners – such as *CEPAD*, *CIEETS* and *Dos Generaciones* – are major actors in national development issues and, in the constant dialogue that they seek to have with government on critical issues, will continually come into contact with Ministries and other government bodies. This is a most important role and, along with others, the support of NNGOs gives such NICNGOs both the resources and confidence to engage with central government on matters of policy and resource allocation.

In terms of direct contact with central government it is only RB that continues to provide support to development projects at Ministry level. In this respect RB's collaboration with the Nicaraguan government dates from the establishing of a presence in the country in 1987. In those early days quite considerable RB resources were channelled through government development programmes targeted at children. These funds had been considerably reduced by the end of the 1990s. Currently RB channels 24% of its project budget via Government bodies at different levels – for example, *MinFam* and the *Procuraderia de los Derechos Humanos de la Ninez* – and 12% on mixed NGO-Government development projects – the *Comisiones Municipales para los Derechos del Nino*. The fall of the Sandinista government in 1990 presented particular problems for RB and it has never been able to establish the same ideological harmony with successive Liberal governments. However this has *not* caused RB to reject the notion of collaborating directly with government bodies although it is now much more selective. While at the national level RB collaborates with *MinFam*, it is at the municipal level where much of the critical work in relation to Children's Rights takes place. In this respect the *Codigo de la Ninez* – promulgated after much concerted pressure – and the *Comisiones de los*

Derechos del Niño provide the two major legal frameworks within which much of RB's work take place. Both of these instruments provide the legitimacy for lobbying and advocacy work on behalf of children and enable both organisations of Nicaraguan Civil Society and international NGOs like RB with the authority to pursue their goals. This strategy has had its successes and, despite the clear difficulties of working with government bodies, RB's current policy is to maintain its direct contact with government and to continue to pursue policy change as well as immediate actions on behalf of children in Nicaragua.

Of the other NNGO-supported projects the Sustainable Agriculture Project implemented by CARE-Norway (NC 12) most vividly illustrates the major difficulties of trying to promote local development on the backs of municipal structures. Over a seven-year period CARE-N implemented the project in five *municipios* in the department of Matagalpa. In this process it "negotiated" with the Nicaraguan government at different levels, although largely at the departmental and municipal levels. Essentially the project was seeking to establish the basis for sustainable agriculture within the framework of an agricultural landscape dominated by small farmers. In the first instance successive Liberal governments since 1990 have been unwilling to actively support the co-operative structures that were the basis of the project's strategy. Furthermore there are few government agricultural services that could potentially provide ongoing support. And, finally, most of the *municipios* are basically resource-poor and simply do not have the means for such ventures. On top of this, of course, there is the highly sectarian nature of municipal politics with little tradition of open policy dialogue and often a lukewarm response to such projects. While "like-minded" *municipios* may publicly support externally funded development projects, few have the resources to play an active role.

More significantly several NNGOs have a long-standing and close relationship with the Department of Esteli that has a well-earned reputation for effective local government.

Indeed, on project NC 3 the municipal authority of Esteli has actually co-funded work in promoting a Youth Network. Esteli was for long the main base in Nicaragua for RB. Finally we should note the frustrations of project NC 13 in trying to get government support for education for the indigenous populations on the Atlantic Coast. Government has been reluctant to transfer resources and to concede control over such matters to the Autonomous Regions and it has been international pressure that has obliged it to recognise the legitimate rights and special educational needs of the country's minority populations.

The relations between government bodies and projects supported by NNGOs have not deviated from the norm of that of most international NGOs. There is clear evidence that, where there is potential, these projects *do* seek to strengthen government structures at the municipal level. However the potential for success for such initiatives seems to depend on both the political orientation of the local government and personal contacts. And even in situations in which the political climate is favourable, the local government may simply not have the human or financial resources to be a meaningful partner. Esteli stands out as an exception based on a strong ideological commitment, while NNGOs like CARE-N can distribute substantial resources at the municipal level and generate some local government involvement. But there is *no* solid alliance between NNGOs and Government in Nicaragua. On the contrary, the present Liberal Government has little taste for the international NGO community. In response NNGO Partners appear to take advantage of opportunities to strengthen the countervailing force of municipal government.

5.5 Working with civil society

Given that most of the Norwegian Public Support channelled through NNGOs is used to strengthen both the Nicaraguan NGO community and their development activities, we can conclude that in general terms NNGOs seek to work constructively with Nicaraguan Civil

Society. However, despite the advances and energies of the past 4–5 years, “civil society” in Nicaragua is still understandably relatively weak and fragmented. Recently the tragedy of Hurricane Mitch has given an unexpected boost to more effective civil society involvement in national policy debate. The setting up of both the *Cordinadora Civil and Concejo Nacional de Planificacion Economica y Social* as instruments of greater civil society participation in national policy formulation have been deliberate donor-supported efforts to break the iron grip of central government on Nicaraguan society. But these are very recent innovations and they function in an atmosphere that is fundamentally antagonistic to such participation. However, in Nicaragua international donors are seeking to impose an agenda of institutional reform that would do away with the excesses of unchecked state power, the lack of accountability, patronage and weak public institutions. In this strategy, the “empowerment” of civil society with the knowledge and skills to become central and responsible players in the ongoing development of Nicaraguan institutions is an overt objective. The working proposition is that civil society “participation” is a key ingredient in the process of transition to new institutions in Nicaragua. To date this participation has been quite limited and fiercely contested and its outcome is not ensured.

Within the above context we found ample, if not substantial, evidence that NNGOs are conscious of the critical processes that are unfolding before them and that they are seeking to offer their support where they can. We have already outlined above the performance of NNGOs in terms of promoting key processes such as “participation”, “organisational development” and “capacity building”. More specifically most of the NNGOs were conversant with civil society development in Nicaragua and supportive to different degrees. Basically NNGO support is at **two levels:**

The development intervention level within the context of community or municipal strengthening and the promoting of transparent and participatory project practice. The projects

studied reflect both the depth of involvement of NNGOs in development at these levels and also the importance that they attach to the setting up and/or the strengthening of local structures as the basis for wider participation. However, NNGOs and their Partners are currently weak in terms of the skills of monitoring and interpreting these processes of community participation. Staff were eloquent on the importance of these qualitative processes but less able to explain the outcomes in terms of observable achievements. However we do not doubt that the work of CARE-N, RB, NPA, NL and SAIH and their Partners has contributed positively to “strengthening” civil society in Nicaragua despite the question marks that still hang over the sustainability of their initiatives. The whole process of “strengthening” civil society structures at the local level in Nicaragua is extremely fragile, but it is work that has to be done.

The national level in terms of the involvement of civil society organisations in the structures of national dialogue. Understandably the NNGOs are less prominent at this level. However their support to a number of their Partner NICNGOs is valued and important in the face of clear Liberal opposition to opening up the doors of government to civil society involvement. NICNGOs such as CIEETS, CEPAD, ANDEN and Dos Generaciones and the agricultural union UNAG are all part of broader civil society that continues to seek greater pluralism in Nicaraguan politics and more transparent national debate. Those NNGOs involved clearly recognise the importance of supporting this broader institutional development and will, we assume, continue to do so as they adjust their strategies of development intervention in the country.

Most NICNGOs and NNGOs appear to recognise both the critical nature of the processes that they support but also their vulnerability in a historical context in which power has been the gift of successive Liberal or Conservative governments and pluralism was *not* the norm. Currently much of the impetus for civil society involvement, in terms of resources,

is both donor-supported and driven. The challenge is to shift the balance – *if* that is possible – so that Nicaraguan institutions can assume full ownership. Realistically this objective is a long time off. The Nicaraguan NGO community that currently is the backbone of civil society is still largely unstable, dependent on external support and with problems of accountability. The whole scenario is completely unpredictable and potentially hostile and one must admire the efforts of those Nicaraguan people and institutions that are trying to bring about the structural changes that might offer them some hope of a securer life.

5.6 NNGOs and the wider international development community in Nicaragua

As part of the study we made contact with representatives of both other international NGOs and Bilateral Aid Agencies in Nicaragua. The purpose was to learn about their strategies and approaches to supporting development initiatives in the country against which we might be able to assess NNGO performance. We did not go into any great depth in this analysis; it was more a question of examining one or two alternative profiles and looking at NNGO support in comparison. With this in mind, therefore, we offer a few brief comments that add a further dimension to the study without being truly authoritative.

Given that unfortunately the Nicaraguan State and its economy are largely dependent on external support, there is an ever-growing international donor presence in Nicaragua that threatens to become a “State within a State”. In terms of the Bilateral Aid Agencies there is a coherence of views largely built around the post-Mitch efforts but also in keeping with what appears to be a common donor platform in respect of the reform of the Nicaraguan State. In this respect most Bilateral Aid Agencies and their respective NGO communities are in agreement in terms of the broad aims and purposes of their interventions, and this is the case with Norway. There is also a shared perspective in terms of the “control” that the Nicaraguan Government seeks to maintain on

the INGO community and suspicions on the depth of corruption in the state administrative structure. Certainly there is a common language among the INGO community that is shared by the NNGOs. This embraces concerns about accountability, creating a mentality of dependence, the apparent inability to have an impact on poverty and the critical need to provide a countervailing force of “empowered civil society” against an inefficient and corrupt State.

Norwegian NGO’s involvement in Nicaragua is in line with a strong Nordic tradition of solidarity with and popular support to the Nicaraguan people and, from 1979–90, with the Sandinista Government. In this respect the NNGOs and their Nordic counterparts have earned a distinctive reputation in the country for ideological commitment, a balanced approach to development initiatives between project actions and political support and an ability to build up very good working relations with their Nicaraguan colleagues. It is the historical force of this people-to-people solidarity that marks out the Nordic presence in Nicaragua and it was noticeable in discussions with both NICNGOs and other international NGOs. Other international NGOs appear to have a more discrete and localised geographical presence or concentrate on specific project level support. Some clearly shun the national context and prefer to put their energies into helping to develop particular areas, sectors or groups. But the NNGOs largely take a “national view” of development issues in Nicaragua and do *not* see their project interventions as the sole purpose of their presence. Most of the NNGOs try to achieve some kind of balance in their development support and to see their actions from the broader perspective of social change and not merely project results.

5.7 The good use of public funds

Public funds demand sound and trustworthy financial accountability and this is foremost in the minds of NNGO staff. However, in a country that is awash with development assistance and in which the misuse of public funds is suspected

even at the highest levels, it is notoriously difficult to maintain a totally secure grip on funds that often pass through several channels before arriving at their final (development) destination. In the midst of the poverty of the vast majority of Nicaraguans, the massive amount of external funds that is available in the country represents a major challenge in terms of their appropriate use. Sound financial accountability is an issue that demands careful attention, with donors using different methods of financial control to ensure proper use. While there is little authoritative evidence on the nature or extent of the misuse of (development) funds, it is generally believed to be fairly widespread at the highest levels of government and also prevalent at the bilateral and NGO level. Indeed there are some who would argue that the Nicaraguan government and its bureaucracy is largely characterised by the misuse of funds and is responsible for the corrupt financial practice that has given the country a poor reputation in the international community.

Given the extent and the level of their involvement in Nicaragua, it is not surprising that the NNGOs to a limited extent have also come up against problems of sound financial management with a small number of their projects. While we found the NNGOs open and frank about situations that they have had to manage, we must keep the whole issue in perspective. Of the eight NNGOs, who between them have been responsible for well over a hundred projects and some 80% of the total bilateral aid via NNGOs during the period 1994–99, we were made aware of *two* examples of relatively serious misuse of Norwegian public funds by two NICNGOs. Of these two cases, one appears to have been quite serious and to have constituted a *prima facie* case of fraud. In this case we also have very serious concerns about the project itself and are quite surprised that NORAD could agree to a second 4-year grant without a thorough evaluation of the first phase. The other involved serious financial mismanagement that did not constitute fraud but that was highly irregular. In both cases the

NNGO concerned took the necessary remedial action.

During our discussions with other NNGOs it became apparent that two others had had minor difficulties with the financial management of the projects that they were supporting. None of these two incidents had involved substantial sums of money and indeed they were largely undetectable. But both NNGOs had reasons for misgivings concerning the two projects.

Similar to other international NGOs, the NNGOs in Nicaragua implement a strict system of financial management that is basically sound and that demands both three-monthly accounts and also an annual audit. In the overwhelming majority of cases this system ensures that Norwegian public funds are used essentially for their stated purpose. Understandably the rigour of the system is much more easily applied when the NNGO is resident in the country. In this respect each of the cases referred to above involved NNGOs that are not represented in Nicaragua, or were not at the time of the mismanagement. It will be impossible to establish a financial management system that is completely immune to external abuse unless it is so severe that it impedes normal development work. NNGOs appear extremely conscious of the importance of ensuring the sound financial management of the funds that they make available to their Nicaraguan Partners and they and their Partners seek to ensure their proper use. However, we must understand the extremely unpredictable context in which they operate and recognise that it is probably impossible to guard against all misuse.

5.8 Concluding comments

In conjunction with the project variables assessed in Chapter 4, the above additional dimensions help to complete the picture of contemporary NNGO performance in Nicaragua. Together they provide a generally positive picture although with some clear areas where performance could be strengthened. Apart from one debatable example, we found no examples of poor project practice although

there was also one case in which we and the NNGO felt that the practice had perhaps been misguided. Overall, however, we could not get a clear picture that took us much further than output and immediate results and we could not conclusively verify some of the broader aims of NNGOs. This we put down to inadequate M&E systems and the quantitative demands of project reporting.

If we consider three levels at which the NNGOs operate – (a) project interventions; (b) organisational/institutional support to

NICNGOs; and (c) strengthening Nicaraguan civil society – we would argue that it is perhaps at the second level of activity (b) that there is a need for reflection and action. The NNGOs are strong on supporting development projects and also the activities of their Partners on the wider national scale. They appear, however, less aware of the critical areas of organisational and institutional development as fundamental supports to the emergence of a vibrant and organisationally strong Nicaraguan civil society. This major dimension of their work should be re-assessed.

6 Analysis and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

While the ToRs for this evaluation have been largely focused on operational aspects of NNGO performance in Nicaragua, inevitably such inquiries touch upon broader issues relating to NGOs as development actors. The situation of NNGOs in Nicaragua is a microcosm that reflects a number of broader debates relating to NGOs. These include, for example, the distinction between civic and the public legitimacy of NGOs' actions and the "autonomy" and "moral authority" that can be compromised by greater dependence on the public purse. There is the evidence that many NGO policies, procedures and practices have become "standardised" within public frameworks. Critical also is evidence of an increasing role of NGOs as contractors of public funds and the long-term consequences of this dependency. Furthermore we should note a commonality of discourse that is built around "partnership", "capacity building" and "sustainability" that has assumptions of universal values. NNGOs in Nicaragua similarly provoke a debate around the distinction between a "needs" and a "rights" approach to development interventions and the role of NGOs in such a contested arena. These and other issues inevitably ran through the evaluation. Some of these issues are touched upon in the review of NGOs as a Channel in Development Aid (Tvedt, 1997).

In terms of the delivery of appropriate inputs, visible improvements in the lives of those expected to benefit and the reporting on project activities, the balance sheet of this evaluation of Norwegian Public Support to Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua between 1994–99 is a generally healthy one. Certainly we found little substantial evidence, in respect of the NNGOs use of these public funds, that would cause us to be concerned about their past or future performance. We found generally acceptable levels of performance, largely related to the delivery of specific benefits to the target population and also to the achievement of development objectives. In keeping with the

systems and procedures that govern the different forms of agreement that NNGOs can have with the DCS, most NNGOs in Nicaragua have reported adequately on their activities on an annual basis. Furthermore there is welcome evidence that many NNGOs do not limit their involvement only to the specific project that has been funded but seek also to see their work within the broader context of civil society and the development of Nicaragua. The work of NNGOs appears to be generally appreciated and, in a number of cases, highly respected. The NNGO community in Nicaragua stands in favourable comparison with that of other countries and its contribution to the country's development over the past 20 years is appreciated. Essentially the whole system of Norwegian Public Support via NNGOs to Nicaragua is working well enough and the funds are generally well managed and competently used, notwithstanding the comments of the 1998 evaluation of Norwegian bilateral aid. So, what needs to change in Nicaragua and in what ways could the current way of working of the NNGOs be improved and strengthened? In formulating our conclusions we recognise that several of the issues may well be generic to the overall structure of Norwegian Public Support to NNGOs and not simply to NNGOs currently working in Nicaragua.

6.2 The changing context of NNGO work in Nicaragua

It would appear that the whole issue of Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua is under discussion. We are also aware that new Guidelines on NORAD assistance to NNGOs are currently in preparation and that an internal re-organisation of the management of this assistance might also take place. In this situation the most critical and uncertain issue would appear to be the current re-assessment of Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua. Whatever the exact outcome of this review, we must reflect on its possible repercussions for the Norwegian NGOs working in the country.

In the short term, Norwegian NGOs are likely to be practically immune from any decisions taken under the State-to-State review. Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua have largely operated in complete detachment from the State-to-State collaboration. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no reason why they should be affected by any decisions taken during the review in relation to Norwegian Public Support to Nicaragua. Indeed, it could be that, in the short term, NNGO support to Nicaragua might be increased in order to ensure a “soft landing” of any changes in strategy. We feel confident that the *political muscle* of the Nicaragua solidarity-lobby in Norway is likely to prevent any erosion of the NNGOs’ position in Nicaragua. Solid arguments could be made that the present situation in Nicaragua makes it more important than ever before that the progressive forces in the country receive support through NNGOs. NNGOs have become key supporters of some of the major civil society actors in Nicaragua and it is inconceivable that this support could be abruptly withdrawn. We are *not*, however, suggesting any substantial increase in bilateral aid via NNGOs. Indeed we sense that Norwegian Public Support to Nicaragua via NNGOs has probably reached its upper limit and that there is limited capacity for future substantial efficient absorption of additional resources.

Finally we should note that 2001 is a presidential election year in Nicaragua with all the inevitable future uncertainties that any major political change could bring. It is common knowledge that, while most are not overtly political, many NNGOs do sympathise with the original values of the Sandinistas. At the moment the election could go either way and there is a genuine prospect that the Sandinistas could indeed return to power. Such an occurrence could have important consequences for NNGOs in Nicaragua and it will be critical to maintain a balance between the wish to provide support and the ability to deliver this support in an effective manner. Furthermore the coming election might well have important consequences for Nicaraguan NGOs in particular and for civil society in general. Both

the Norwegian Government and the NNGOs support initiatives to strengthen a more pluralist democracy in Nicaragua with institutionalised accountability and meaningful action to tackle the country’s endemic poverty. It is for this reason that many NICNGOs feel that the election will be the most critical political event since 1979 and could have either a profound positive or negative impact on the donor driven processes of pluralism and good governance.

6.3 The structure and management of NNGO support to Nicaragua

(a) The present type and level of NNGO-involvement in Nicaragua ensures plurality and wide support and involvement from many quarters of Norwegian society. However, the resulting lack of focus probably implies that the efficiency, effectiveness and impact, for example, of Norwegian Public Support are probably less than they would be if NNGO activities were less dispersed and more focused around a series of common themes. However, the DCS does not have the capacity to provide effective technical support to the great number and wide range of NGO projects presently supported in countries like Nicaragua nor to demand greater coherence of approach. It is increasingly being recognised that the promotion of effective socio-economic development and change requires a good mix of knowledge, approaches, capacity and experience. This calls for a concentration of strategies, efforts and resources in any given context. However, the lack of co-ordination – and even informed awareness about who does what – means that the possibilities for synergy between NNGO activities in Nicaragua are not achieved. In this respect we are referring to co-ordination within the NNGO sector in Nicaragua and *not* co-ordination between the NNGOs and the official bilateral programme.

This is, of course, a delicate issue and we would not wish to undermine individual NNGO autonomy. However, we were struck by a notable lack of “co-operation” between the NNGOs in Nicaragua and the lack of contact between them apart from periodic co-ordination

meetings summoned by the Embassy. Overall we found the NNGOs understandably wary on this issue of “co-ordination” in the sense of its potential to undermine their autonomy and independence of action. Clearly the NNGOs equate “co-ordination” with *control* and the danger of tilting their relationship too far in the direction of NORAD. Perhaps it is not a question of “control”; it is much more one of seeking to extract the maximum impact from the work of the NNGOs. Since many NNGOs in Nicaragua work on common themes and in the same geographical areas, the notion of co-ordination is *not* unreasonable. It would constitute a challenge to the NNGOs but one that they should consider in the interests of maximising their impact in Nicaragua.

Either the “co-ordination” of NNGOs in Nicaragua *is* an issue or it is not! In this respect the position of NORAD – as the management agency – needs to be clearer. *If* it believes that there are clear and positive benefits to be gained by some greater co-ordination between the NNGOs in Nicaragua, then why has it not acted? It could be argued that the present lack of even some limited co-ordination within the NNGO sector in Nicaragua is not the best means to ensure the maximum return on an estimated 40% of bilateral aid. At play here also is the balance between public efficiency and the autonomy of NNGOs and, in this respect, it is only fair that the MFA or NORAD spell out the issues involved.

(b) It is clear that to date little serious consideration had been given to examine ways in which greater “*added-value*” could be achieved in terms of overall Norwegian Public Support to Nicaragua. Indeed we were struck by the lack of initiatives in this respect. Essentially there are **two programmes** receiving Norwegian Public Support in Nicaragua – the State-to-State Bilateral Programme and that of the NNGOs – and they appear to operate in two very different worlds. In such a circumstance it is not unreasonable to assume some minimum of co-ordination / co-operation / relation between both. But this is not the case in Nicaragua. Indeed we found a

situation that was almost the opposite in the sense that both sides seem to have agreed *not* to pursue the matter with any vigour. If that is the official position, then our comments are irrelevant. Indeed it might be the wisest course given the intrinsic difficulties of co-ordinating programmes coming from such different directions. However, our Terms of Reference would suggest a concern that this state of affairs should not continue.

We are not suggesting that the NNGOs in Nicaragua merely become sub-contractors for NORAD. On the contrary, we feel that a more concerted effort should be made to examine ways in which the rich experiences of the NNGOs in Nicaragua could be made available to inform the bilateral aid programme. But while there might be coincidencia in terms of NNGO programmes and approaches in Nicaragua, there is no common strategy in terms of priority issues or geographical concentration. The result is a kaleidoscope of strategies, priorities, and overlapping approaches that may make it difficult to inform the other component of the bilateral aid programme. Any development programme needs to keep itself informed and aware of changes and new initiatives and the sharing of knowledge in this respect can only be beneficial. This sharing could be based, for example, on thematic areas, geographical development priorities or emerging strategic issues in relation to Nicaragua’s development. At the moment nobody appears to have an informed view on the potential that could be reaped from a greater “sharing” between the different actors involved in Norwegian Public Support to Nicaragua. The current situation of benign neglect could be overlooking some interesting potential initiatives.

One area in which NNGOs could potentially be more active in Nicaragua is in the formulation of Norwegian Bilateral Aid Policy to the country. However, it would appear that NNGOs did *not* have a major role in this exercise. Indeed, an updated Country Strategy Paper for Nicaragua is being prepared but, despite being responsible for a considerable part of bilateral aid, the NNGOs appear not to be too closely involved.

NNGOs are *part* of Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua and yet they play no formal role in the formulation of policy. This is an unfortunate situation since several of the NNGOs have a number of relevant and interesting comments to make on the content of Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua. Indeed we would argue that several of the bigger NNGOs – for example, NPA and RB – have far more in-country experience than NORAD and could make very useful contributions to Norwegian bilateral aid strategy. It seems, however, that NORAD has no policy of consistently seeking the advice and views of these highly experienced development agencies.

(c) We must also consider the role and the capacity of Norwegian Embassy staff in Nicaragua to play a more proactive role in shaping the overall bilateral programme and managing a strategy that seeks to strengthen the contribution of the NNGOs. On the latter issue the current role of the Embassy, apart from its role in the project approval process, is minimalist and largely passive and reactive. Essentially the Embassy has very little idea of the detail of NNGOs, their work and their performance in Nicaragua and it is in a very poor position from which to take a more proactive role. Indeed the Embassy is in an invidious position with few resources to supposedly “manage” a substantial bilateral programme and little clear guidance of what a more proactive role might entail. While relations between the NNGOs and the Embassy appear good and the three monthly meetings are seen as most useful by both sides, the NNGOs lack that hard technical support that realistically should be provided under the bilateral programme. Of course, the NNGOs would almost certainly react cautiously to a stronger technical capacity in the Embassy since it might infringe on their own autonomy and these feelings will need to be accommodated. Currently the Embassy does not have the staff to play a more technical and proactive role and there the issue might end. But the current role of benign *accompaniment* results in the lack of any detailed technical overview of a substantial part of the bilateral aid

programme. As a major component of Norwegian bilateral aid to Nicaragua, NNGOs lack clear and collective technical support.

(d) Finally, this evaluation offers us the opportunity to look closely – and in a generic sense – at NNGO relations with NORAD and the procedures that govern the project cycle. These relations and procedures take place mostly in Oslo but their consequences are felt in Nicaragua. Furthermore we understand that changes may soon occur within the procedures that govern NNGO–NORAD relations. Positively, most NNGOs welcome the largely “hands-off” style of management of the DCS and the fact that the present overall system strengthens rather than threatens their independence and autonomy of action. In particular the programme and the framework agreements offer an acceptable level of latitude within the project cycle. There appears to be less contact between the DCS and NNGOs once a project cycle has been approved, although the more general, thematic meetings are welcomed for their broader discussions. Essentially the NNGOs are happy to keep the DCS at arm’s length and, in return, the DCS appears content if the NNGOs are able to complete their annual transactions with only a modicum of problems.

On the negative side the NNGOs are most concerned by what they see as the increasing administrative burdens associated with the project cycle. In particular certain stages are found to be the most onerous:

- the annual cycle of project applications that are demanding and essentially repetitive
- the apparent lengthy budgetary process that similarly becomes tedious and repetitive
- the lack of any substantial contact with NORAD on, for example, policy issues
- NORAD’s focus on the project level and its inability to explore the broader “development” picture at programme level

- The continuous reporting that is repetitive and adds little, after a while, to our knowledge of NNGO performance
- The tying of project support to the Norwegian Kroner and not the American Dollar. This policy is widely criticised by NNGO Partners in Nicaragua and is responsible for much loss of income when exchange rates fluctuate

Such is the bulk of NNGO involvement in Nicaragua, that NORAD appears unable to do more than ensure that in general terms the NNGOs and their projects are on course. In this respect it would appear also to have little time for quality control or on-site verification with the result that several projects continue for a further period when a detailed examination might well propose the opposite. However, NORAD does not relent on the repetitive and heavy administrative reporting that it demands. Furthermore, while it appears that budgets might be diminishing, these relentless reporting demands of NORAD are not. In this respect the whole system appears trapped in an administrative straightjacket from which it cannot escape. Not all NNGOs in Nicaragua are the same and they have different types of agreements with NORAD. But the chorus of criticism was quite widespread and there can be no doubt that the current over-demanding system of administrative control does *not* contribute to the effectiveness of NNGOs in Nicaragua. On the contrary, it has caused most of them to take an entirely short-term, results-orientated view of their work and not allowed them to progressively explore other options. It is most unfortunate to see some of the well-established, technically competent and potentially innovative NNGOs in Nicaragua burdened with this repetitive cycle of quantitative reporting when they could be playing a more imaginative role within the context of the overall bilateral programme.

Finally we should remember that what affects the NNGOs is eventually passed on to their Partners in Nicaragua. Here again the chorus was universal with, at times, a touch a

bitterness. Some NICNGOs feel that the NNGOs are being over-demanding in what they ask of them and are tired of the continual need to either report or to assist by providing additional data and information for some other NNGO survey or inquiry. While NICNGOs were generally complementary of their relations with their NNGO Partners, they were less positive on matters relating to budgets, reporting and exchange rates. Indeed in the world of massive donor involvement in Nicaragua, we admired the positive tone of the NICNGOs that we met. But as a basic principle of involvement, NORAD should note that it is the in-country NGOs – in this case the Nicaraguan NNGOs – who carry the burden of project implementation and, while not jeopardising its responsibility for public funds, it should actively seek ways to reduce this burden.

6.4 The balance sheet of NNGO performance in Nicaragua

Our overall assessment of the (development) performance of NNGOs in Nicaragua is a generally positive one in terms of their use of Norwegian Public Funds. In many ways they are not very different in overall performance to several of their European counterparts currently working in Nicaragua. There are noticeable similarities in content, approach and development practice between several of the major groups of international NGOs in the country and particularly those that derive their support from public funds. In the very demanding context of Nicaragua all of the NNGOs have their pluses and minuses, although there were more noticeable performance difficulties associated with some of the smaller NNGOs with less of a strong base in the country. With hindsight we would probably be doubtful about the continuing support for one or two of the projects, but this is a perfectly acceptable ratio. We should also note that, apart from CARE, essentially we are judging NNGO Partner performance and most NNGOs are one of many donors to their Partners.

Overwhelmingly in Nicaragua international NGOs have been forced to provide the (development) services that the Nicaraguan Government is unable to provide. In this situation and in the context of endemic poverty, the international NGO development agenda is largely dictated by the needs of the population. Understandably the NNGOs are under the same pressure. If we divide the project matrix into two, the overall profile of the 15 illustrative projects studied shows a slight balance towards basic service delivery – NC 4, 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14 and 15 – although even in several of these projects there are strong elements of community development and training. The other projects fit more within a broader organisational / democratisation / training perspective with the ultimate objective of strengthening some aspect of Nicaraguan civil society. Overall the profile suggests a useful balance between the need to meet immediate needs but also to strengthen those groups and institutions that play a role in Nicaraguan civil society. However, we would suggest that the NNGOs and NORAD examine ways in which NNGO performance in Nicaragua could be strengthened in certain areas:

Where appropriate, support to the organisational development of NNGO Partner organisations. We noted that little of this kind of support if offered systematically to NICNGOs and we suspect that several of them could now usefully benefit from some support to their own organisations.

We feel also that the NNGOs in Nicaragua could beneficially examine their programme and project work in terms of the lessons and implications for future policy and practice. Several NNGOs appear aware of the importance of advocacy at the national level. However it is important also to seek to use good practice as a means to promote change at the different levels of Government.

Like many NGOs that receive substantial public support, NNGOs are bound by the reporting requirements of their bilateral agencies. We are aware that changes are afoot in this respect and

hope that they may lead to a better balance between quantity and quality. We have commented elsewhere on the generally limited nature of NNGO M&E systems. In this respect we would underline the urgent need to radically alter the whole basis of these current systems so that they are more sensitive to developments and change and not merely seen as the means to satisfy public demands for progress reports.

Many of the NNGOs in Nicaragua are driven by a commitment of solidarity with the Nicaraguan people and a wish to respond to evident needs. These are worthy motives and critical to energetic performance. However, we were struck by the lack of strategy in much of their work. By this we mean not only strategy in the broad sense of their country programmes, but also in terms of key performance variables such as “gender” and “democratisation”. Currently NNGOs in Nicaragua are largely driven by the demands of the project cycle. In the unstable environment of Nicaragua “strategic thinking” becomes important.

Finally, we would suggest that, in order to achieve maximum impact and synergy between NNGO supported projects, NORAD and the NNGOs should jointly look at the issue of the geographical spread of NNGO-supported development initiatives in Nicaragua. We do not have a complete picture of the current spread, but we suspect that there is much overlapping and some duplication, particularly in the central/western areas of the country. In contrast, NNGO involvement in the Atlantic Coast region is relatively modest.

NNGOs in Nicaragua are understandably driven by the need to implement effectively and to report adequately on the substantial public money that they receive for their development work. Inevitably, therefore, these two tasks tend to take priority over all other actions. While income and resources are critical inputs they can often overwhelm development practice particularly if they are accompanied by standardised reporting demands. Several NNGOs in Nicaragua appear to have achieved a balance between their contractual obligations

and the ability to innovate and critically review their practice but others have not.

6.5 Summarising the major NNGO achievements in Nicaragua

We concluded the evaluation by asking both the NICNGOs and the NNGOs what they felt had been the **major achievements** of the NNGOs, in terms of their development work in the past five years. In this respect it would appear that there are **four areas** in which both NNGOs and NICNGOs believe that the NNGOs have made a noticeable contribution to the development of Nicaragua:

The strengthening of the Nicaraguan NGO sector specifically, and Nicaraguan civil society in general, in terms of promoting greater pluralism in the sector and a countervailing power in relation to the State. This work has involved building democratic organisations at the community level, capacity building and accountability. Certainly these themes run through much of NNGO-supported work in Nicaragua and one could realistically expect that, over a decade, this work would have a noticeable impact. It should be noted, however, both that the NNGOs have been more involved with the NGO sector in Nicaragua and less with civil society more broadly and also there has probably been a Sandinista bias in their work.

The strengthening of the position of Nicaraguan women within development initiatives. NNGOs feel that they have consistently and systematically ensured that their development initiatives included both women and men and were the basis for more balanced gender relations. We saw plenty of evidence of the inclusion of women and girls in the benefits of development initiatives. Whether all of this work adds up to the “empowerment” of women – as was suggested – is, however, another matter. However, the evidence is strong that NNGOs and their Partners have actively sought (successfully) to promote the interests and to defend the rights of Nicaraguan women and girls.

The systematic use by the NNGOs of their Nicaraguan experiences to forge links between Popular Organisations in Norway with similar bodies in Nicaragua. In this respect several Norwegian Trade Unions, Church Groups and Solidarity Groups have built active links with Nicaraguan counterparts in different parts of the country. For many years such links were quite active with exchanges in both directions. However, there is a feeling that the era of Norwegian–Nicaraguan solidarity might be drawing to a close, as a new generation is more distant from the events that brought about the solidarity. But these changing circumstances in no way diminish the positive achievements of these links in the 1990s.

The promotion of alternative approaches and methodologies to development interventions. NNGOs have systematically allied themselves to movements that have supported less purely capitalist approaches to economic development and instead have helped in the stimulation of alternative forms of agricultural production – for example, co-operatives. In response to the neo-liberal structural adjustment agenda that has been imposed on Nicaragua since the early 1990s, NNGOs have also supported civil society efforts to promote alternative forms of development based on community participation and sustainability. Furthermore some of the specialist agencies such as Redd Barna have undoubtedly had an enormous influence, along with their Save the Children colleagues, in radically promoting a different vision of children and their development in Nicaragua. Clearly also NCA has, over the years, had a noticeable effect on the organisation, leadership and development work of several NICNGOs that has probably strengthened their ability to take a longer term view of development work.

The above broad achievements represent a creditable commentary on the NNGOs’ role and performance in Nicaragua over the past decade and more. While we would probably question the full force of the first two achievements, we certainly recognise the validity of the other two.

6.6 The future scenario of NNGO work in Nicaragua

In the first instance we should note that few of the NNGOs have country strategy documents for their work in Nicaragua that would give us a glimpse of their future expectations and intentions. Most are totally immersed in their day-to-day project activities and the demands made upon them by both NORAD and their NICNGO Partners that they appear to have little time for strategic thinking or planning. Only the larger NNGOs have, or are developing, this longer-term perspective, while the smaller ones are more concerned to ensure the work of the projects that they support. We accept, of course, that in the unpredictable world of development practice in Nicaragua, such future strategic thinking is subject to the influence of many external factors. Nonetheless it is for this reason – and also for the fact that many of the NNGOs have been doing the same thing in Nicaragua for over a decade now – that it is a useful exercise for NNGOs to think ahead over the next five years and to assess what challenges they might confront. Based on our discussions we present four areas in which we feel that the NNGOs in Nicaragua will face their major challenges over the next 5–10 years:

Clearly the future direction of the Norwegian bilateral aid programme would have major implications for the NNGOs in Nicaragua. In this respect, the quicker this uncertain situation is resolved the better. Furthermore the apparent reduction also in the funds available to NNGOs will severely limit their actions and cause them to make choices between alternative courses of action. Finally we should underline the managerial and administrative systems that underpin the bilateral support to NNGOs and which have become exceedingly burdensome. These are uncertain times for NNGOs in Nicaragua, both in terms of the unpredictability of the Nicaraguan Government and also the uncertainties surrounding the future policy of their own Government. But, on the other hand, a reduction in the funds available to NNGOs in Nicaragua might bring about a serious discussion on approaches and priorities in a situation of declining resources.

A major challenge surely will be to maintain the momentum of development work in the face of intractable structural problems and an inability to make any substantial impact on the lives of the 80% of Nicaraguans who live in poverty. Despite the massive national and international efforts of the past two decades and “islands of progress”, most development initiatives come up against a system that is unequal, corrupt and sustained largely by external support. In the circumstances the maintenance of this momentum becomes a major challenge. The NNGOs and their Partners are involved in the extremely demanding area of promoting change but in circumstances when officials can change, staff move on, communities are essentially conservative and can be suspicious and when, despite the efforts, little seems to change. After more than a decade in this environment the NNGOs and their Partners have to try and maintain the momentum and the energies of their staff. It is to their credit that both sides recognise the issue as important.

Another challenge for the NNGOs in Nicaragua concerns the area of their development strategies and approach in a situation of apparently intractable problems. This is a critical issue and it underlines the weakness in the whole Norwegian bilateral aid programme to Nicaragua via the NNGOs. This programme stresses the disbursement of funds and sound financial accountability but it appears unable to support or to monitor the technical development of the programme. As such we found several of the NNGOs searching round for guidance in terms of approach and methodology. Essentially, while it has certainly alleviated the poverty of many Nicaraguan poor people, over a decade of committed effort by NNGOs and many other development agencies has not had the hoped for impact in terms of poverty reduction. Many development agencies in the country face the dilemma of what to do in such a situation. For example, should the NNGOs try and divorce themselves more from direct project interventions and put more effort into lobbying and policy influence? This option could be difficult in a situation in which the donor tends to demand concrete results.

Furthermore, is it not the time to make a substantial effort to strengthen civil society organisations as a countervailing power to an inefficient State? More concretely, is it not the time also to shift the balance from the production of results to the promotion of change? Furthermore there is much that the NNGOs in Nicaragua could learn from a rights as opposed to a needs approach to development interventions. In sum it would be unfortunate if the NNGOs in Nicaragua were not encouraged to experiment methodologically and to move away from seeing development merely in terms of “results” and more in terms of its contribution to social change. The scaling-up of more localised development efforts could help consolidate the NNGOs role in addressing some of the more powerful forces that deter the country’s development.

Finally, there is the possible scenario of the increasing hostility of the Nicaraguan State to international NGO activities and, similarly, endemic corruption that could endanger the very basis of the NNGOs’ work. With their massive network of service orientated development interventions, both NICNGOs and international NGOs play a crucial role in maintaining a lid on potential social upheaval in Nicaragua by satisfying basic needs. For how long can this state of affairs continue if the State and its structure of patronage refuse to promote the kinds of changes and behaviour that development agencies are seeking. The next election may well be crucial. Whatever its outcome the international community – and the NNGOs – may well be forced to dramatically revise their strategies in relation to Nicaragua.

Challenges help to maintain the dynamic of development practice and it is important that a process of continual assessment – reflection – adjustment is part of all development agencies. At this moment this dynamic is not wholly evident among the NNGOs in Nicaragua. And yet we would argue that, in such a context, it is all the more critical. Seeking to promote social change in a context like Nicaragua is a major challenge in itself and it is vital that NNGOs continually have this perspective on their

agendas and, equally importantly, that the system allows them to do so.

6.7 Recommendations

1. Given the nature and depth of the current commitment of both NNGOs and the Norwegian Bilateral Aid Programme to Nicaragua and that country’s unfortunate status as one of the poorest countries in the world, we would recommend that a less operationally focused but a more strategic and “visionary” examination of NNGOs’ in Nicaragua be undertaken. We do not see this as a major exercise, but more as a seminar or workshop type event to examine future scenarios. Such an examination could serve as a microcosm of the dilemmas and challenges of publicly supported NGOs working in countries that manifest such structural and seemingly intractable problems. We make this recommendation since we felt that the current situation has the effect of tying NNGOs and their Partners into a system that satisfies the public demand for accountability but which leaves NNGOs with little chance to ask themselves some critical questions. Standardisation, as opposed to innovation, is more widespread and there are few future scenarios being examined.
2. The MFA should undertake a more detailed review into the roles and responsibilities of the various actors involved in the management, quality control and on-going analysis of Norwegian bilateral technical assistance via NNGOs. This evaluation portrays a microcosm of these roles and relationships within the specific context of Nicaragua and has concluded that there is confusion. Within the context of the “autonomy” of NNGOs and the framework of their programme of work agreed with the DCS, there is need for a more specific determination of roles and responsibilities in terms of a more proactive assessment of performance, critical issues and future directions. Currently there is no clear

guidance as to who exactly is responsible for these functions with the result that NNGOs are largely left alone until the time of annual reporting requirements. NNGOs in Nicaragua are heavily project orientated and lack a mechanism that would encourage and support them in keeping abreast of parallel issues other than immediate project practice.

3. We have commented in several places in our report on both the clear evidence of confusion and also the potential benefits that could be gained by more consistent and effective co-ordination of NNGO project based work within the context of the Norwegian Bilateral Aid Programme. In this respect we have referred to this co-ordination mainly among the NNGOs in Nicaragua but also between the NNGOs and the Bilateral Aid Programme. Given the prominence of this issue in the 1997 Review of Norwegian Bilateral Aid to Nicaragua, the current confusion and the clear range of views, we would strongly recommend that the MFA take the steps necessary to examine the issue and to put in place the mechanisms and procedures that would facilitate greater co-ordination. More effective co-ordination could bring additional benefits from the overall Bilateral Programme and this possibility should be examined. It should be added that we understand the crucial issue of balance between control and co-ordination. For this reason careful thought will have to be given to defining the objective of the exercise. Moreover, the NNGOs should be effectively consulted and involved in the whole process.
4. NNGOs are locked into a fairly static system of monitoring project performance. This system is over concerned with results, financial management and timely reporting, it is very demanding and it is largely inadequate in terms of assessing social change in relation to, for example, many of the variables examined in this evaluation. This problem must be tackled head-on if the

MFA is to have a more authoritative understanding of the real impact of its technical assistance. In this respect, therefore, we would recommend that the MFA commission an urgent review and detailed analysis of the current project PME system that is used by both NORAD and NNGOs. This review would examine its potential for adaptation and suggest the steps that would be required in order to make it more appropriate to the complex nature of monitoring social change. In the immediate term the MFA should seek to agree with the NNGOs ways in which the system can be made less demanding of their Project Partners without compromising the legitimate requirements of Norwegian Development Co-operation.

5. We have noted that in Nicaragua there are a number of projects that have received NNGO support over a long period of time. While we would not argue against the importance of long-term support, we suggest that such commitments should be subject to detailed periodic review and should have an exit strategy always in mind. In this respect we found little evidence that any detailed assessment had been made of these major commitments. We would, therefore, recommend that towards the end of the first 3–5 year support and every 2 years subsequently, an assessment of such projects should be undertaken and future scenarios realistically analysed. In particular we would recommend that more emphasis should be placed on developing programmes, as opposed to individual projects, in response to some of the complex problems that the NNGOs and their Partners confront.

In view of the importance of developing the structures and skills required to carry forward development initiatives, we recommend that NNGOs look more closely at the current balance in their work in Nicaragua. This balance is between immediate project practice and longer-term capacity building that would include such issues as organisational

development and advocacy work. We are aware that several of the longer-standing NNGOs have both of these issues on their agendas and also that, in such a multi-donor context, it is difficult to separate out the distinctive role of NNGOs. We are also aware that the demands of project implementation in such a stressful environment

as Nicaragua are not always conducive to promoting longer-term organisational change. However we suggest that capacity building should now have a more prominent place and that NNGOs should begin to address the issue in relation to their Partners and their own staff.

Annex 1 Terms of Reference

EVALUATION OF THE PUBLIC SUPPORT TO THE NORWEGIAN NGOs WORKING IN NICARAGUA

1. Background

In 1998 an evaluation of the Norwegian development co-operation with Nicaragua for the country strategy period (1994–97) was conducted. This evaluation only briefly discussed the assistance channelled through the Norwegian NGOs that was administered from NORAD in Oslo. In view of the substantial allocations the Norwegian NGOs have received for their work in Nicaragua, it was decided to conduct a separate evaluation of this assistance. This evaluation will not include the support the Norwegian Embassy in Nicaragua has given to many local NGOs. The latter assistance is the subject of a separate review being conducted by the Embassy in Nicaragua.

Important reference documents for the evaluation will be “Guidelines for NORAD Assistance to the Activities of Norwegian Non-Governmental Organisations in Developing Countries (“Retningslinjer for støtte til private organisasjoners virksomhet i utviklingsland”, juni 1994) and “Strategies for Bilateral Development Co-operation, Part I and II”, (Strategier for bilateral bistand, del I og II, september 1990 og 1992).

2. Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is to get an overview of the Norwegian public support to Norwegian NGOs and their local partners working in Nicaragua and assess the results, relevance and efficiency of this assistance. The evaluation will cover the same period as the evaluation of the country strategy 1994–97, but it will also include the years of 1998 and 1999. The evaluation will be used to assess the future directions of public support to Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua. Another purpose of the evaluation is to contribute to a learning

process for the NGOs and the public, which have supported the work of the Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua.

3. Major Issues

- 3.1 A description shall be made of the total financial support provided by NORAD and MFA to the Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua.
- 3.2 A description and an assessment will be made of how the political, social, cultural and economic context provides opportunities and constraints for the work of the NGOs in Nicaragua. The evaluation will describe the legal and administrative framework governing the foreign NGOs in Nicaragua.
- 3.3 The goal achievement and cost effectiveness of the work of the NGOs will be assessed. In particular the impacts concerning poverty reduction, improvement of the position of women and the promotion of community participation will be assessed. The evaluation will also assess the role the NGOs have played through their work in terms of advocacy for human rights, good governance and rights of children. The evaluation will discuss to what extent the support to the Norwegian NGOs has been co-ordinated with the Norwegian country programme and contributed to achieve the major objectives of Norwegian development co-operation.
- 3.4 The evaluation will describe to what extent the central and local levels of the Government of Nicaragua have been informed about the support to Norwegian NGOs and how the activities of the NGOs have been co-ordinated with the government’s own plans and activities at the central and local levels.

- 3.5 The evaluation will describe the collaborating partners of the Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua. An assessment will be made of the coherence between the priorities of the Norwegian NGOs and the local NGOs and partners with whom they collaborate. The evaluation will discuss whether the Norwegian NGOs have influenced or changed the agenda of their collaborating partners. The evaluation will assess to what extent the collaboration has contributed to the institutional development and empowerment of the local partners. The evaluation will also discuss if, and to what extent, the Norwegian assistance has created an attitude of dependence among the local NGOs on external donors, which has hindered mobilisation of local resources.
- 3.6 The evaluation will discuss how the activities of the Norwegian NGOs relate to the work carried out by international and national NGOs operating in the country. The evaluation will describe the transparency of the NGO sector, discuss the possibilities for mismanagement of funds and resources and methods by which mismanagement can be reduced.
- 3.7 The evaluation will assess the role the support to the Norwegian NGOs has played in terms of strengthening the civil society and its capacity to exercise an influence in dealing with the state. The evaluation will also assess to what extent this assistance has contributed to strengthening/-weakening of the state.
- 3.8 The evaluation will assess the reporting, monitoring and evaluation system of the Norwegian NGOs and how the NGOs report on their activities and their results to NORAD and MFA. The evaluation will assess whether the Norwegian support to the NGO sector is sustainable both in financial and institutional terms.

4. Methods

The evaluation will need to be based on the following information:

- a) Access to all relevant documents in Norway and Nicaragua.
- b) Status reports for all relevant activities within the NGO co-operation preferably as of December 31, 1999.
- c) Access to information from and assessments by relevant people who have played an important role in the activities carried out by Norwegian NGOs and their collaborating partners during this period.
- d) Access to information from and assessments by the principal local NGO networks, social organisations in the country and by other relevant institutions and people.

The evaluation will to a large extent involve examination and analysis of documents (desk study). Material and analyses resulting from the desk study will be supplemented and adjusted by means of interviews of central participants and other relevant people and by impressions derived from field trips and interviews of target groups. All actors being interviewed will prior to the interviews be informed of how the information they provide will be used.

5. Reporting of findings

The evaluation should result in a report not exceeding 40 pages, including a summary of maximum four pages. The report should be organised in accordance with the Ministry's format for evaluation reports, distributed when the contract is signed.

The consultant will throughout the work have a close collaboration with representatives of the Norwegian NGOs. One or several seminars will be conducted both in Norway and Nicaragua with the involved NGOs in order to obtain and check information, which has been collected.

Throughout the evaluation, the consultant must make efforts so that the evaluation becomes a learning experience for the people and institutions involved in the activities of the NGOs.

After the completion of the work, the report should, upon request, be presented at a seminar arranged by the MFA.

6. Timetable

The evaluation should be accomplished within a period of three to four months in the course of 2000.

Annex 2 Approach and Methodology of the Evaluation

The evaluation was undertaken over a limited period of time. There was a lot of preparation needed to get all of the stakeholders in place so that we could complete the work before the end of the year. Once that had been achieved the main fieldwork in both Nicaragua and Norway took place between 13 November and 14 December 2000. We had to combine a number of elements into this short period of time – documentation review, project visits, self-assessments, key informant interviews, other literature reviews and writing up our report. We had to get the balance right between assessing NGO performance at the project level and exploring those broader issues that also featured in our ToRs. A key issue was how much time to devote to the project visits as opposed to the other methods that would take us into some of the broader issues. In the overall exercise we were guided by the following broad methodological principles:

Key Stakeholder Involvement: NICNGO staff, NNGO Partner and direct project beneficiaries. This was not always be straightforward given the fact that many of the NNGOs were not be represented in the country but would also certainly have views on a project visited or on some of the broader issues. This means that we did most of the work in Nicaragua but then visited Oslo both before and at the end of our fieldwork in order to complete the overall picture.

Beneficiary Involvement: To the extent possible at each project, we sought to ensure that the views of project beneficiaries were also heard. These beneficiaries included not only men but also equally importantly women and, where relevant, children.

Evaluation as a Learning Process: It was critical that we undertook the project level fieldwork in a manner that consistently sought to inform stakeholders of what we were doing, explaining the method of our work and generally giving them a sense that we were all - and not just the

external consultants – involved in trying to understand the issues involved.

Consistency: A major difficulty of multi-project and multi-thematic evaluations is to ensure that the outcome is not a series of individual evaluation exercises. In order to achieve this we had to ensure consistency of approach both in terms of analysis and method. It is only in this way that we would be able to aggregate our findings and draw overall conclusions that we feel are relevant to the performance of NNGOs in Nicaragua as a whole.

Emphasis on Analysis and Conclusions: Given the fact that this is a multi-thematic evaluation and that we would need to aggregate our findings for an overall summary report, we have tended not to include much basic description of the projects visited in our text or of the different procedures that underlie the relationship between NORAD and NNGOs. The emphasis in our report throughout, therefore, is on analysis and conclusions. We have not evaluated the 15 projects visited but used our analysis of them to form the basis of our assessment of overall NNGO performance in Nicaragua.

Overall the whole exercise lacked a solid basis of information and on-going analysis for us to argue that we have conducted an “evaluation” in the true sense of the word. On several of the issues “evaluated” there was simply no baseline date to be able to “evaluate” progress or advances. Furthermore, such wide-ranging issues as “efficiency”, “partnership” and “democratisation”, for example, demand different methodological approaches that we were unable to develop in the time available. The lack of any prior monitoring of performance variables such as these made it difficult to establish a baseline against which we could make judgements. However, we feel confident that the substantial documentation review, the detailed analysis of project performance and the self-assessment have given us a sufficient

knowledge base from which to support our overall analysis and conclusions.

distinct but inter-related areas of the work of Norwegian NGOs in Nicaragua:

In our initial structuring of the evaluation exercise, we saw it as essentially exploring six

The Basis and Principles of NNGOs Project Operations: Partnership, Participation, Promotion of Civil Society, Solidarity, Organisational Development and Capacity Building	Norwegian NGO Project Interventions: relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, effect, impact and sustainability	The Context of NNGO Support in Nicaragua: political environment, civil society and NGO, trends and tendencies and foreign aid
Perceptions of Different Actors and Project Beneficiaries of the Impact and of the Development and Change brought about by NNGO support	The work of NNGOs in Nicaragua within the context of Norwegian Official Aid	Future scenarios and issues in relation to the work of NNGOs in Nicaragua

This overall framework helped us to structure our approach to the extremely broad themes underlying the evaluation, the multiplicity of actors and the range of project interventions. We have not based our report entirely on this framework although its influence can be seen in its structure. The first stage of most exercises like this evaluation demands such an inter-linking framework and the above is the one that helped us to structure the evaluation exercise within the time frame and resources available.

Principal Methods and Instruments Used

Ex-ante evaluation of key variables in the project documentation
Workshop(s) / meetings with key Nicaraguan and Norwegian stakeholders

Key questions around the performance variables

Matrix of a sample of stakeholders

Individual case studies

Quantitative assessment

Focus groups – seminars with key informants

Self assessment

Project visits

The above methods and instruments were used at different stages of the evaluation and in different contexts. In particular the formulation of key questions, the self-assessment of performance and the use of key informants on a number of important themes were basic elements of our approach.

Annex 3 Brief Profiles of Norwegian NGOs Involved in the Evaluation

Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) is a Humanitarian NGO founded by the labour movement in Norway in 1939. NPA initiated its programme of co-operation with Nicaragua in 1983. In the first years of the Sandinista Government and some Partners have included Nicaraguan government institutions. Since 1987, however, virtually all of NPA Partners have been social organisations and local NGOs. NPA rarely works directly with the target groups (*grupos de base*). NPA currently works with some 23 partners in Nicaragua on a wide range of problems and issues. In fact, no other Norwegian NGO has had programme activities in as many different thematic areas as NPA. Over the period 1994–99, NPA has worked in the following areas: agriculture and rural development, small business, training and capacity building, environment, and organisational development. The overall development objective is to contribute to the democratisation of the Nicaraguan society while endeavouring to improve living conditions through strengthening of organisations and the participation of marginalised groups. The three main priorities of the programme are the following: Local Development; Organisational Strengthening and Lobbying; and promotion and defence of Human Rights. NPA's activities have been guided by a country strategy for Nicaragua that was formulated in a highly participatory manner in 1995. In 1999 a new country strategy was published for the period 1999–2003.

Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) is an ecumenical organisation established in 1947 and governed by a Board representing a diverse range of Norwegian Churches. Its strong value base is expressed in the guiding document, "Together for a Just World" which provides the framework for its programmes across the world. NCA operates with three core foci – to protect and save lives; working to increase living conditions; and influencing attitudes and decisions. Globally, NCA received 27% of its funds from NORAD in 1997. The work in Nicaragua forms part of the Central America programme run from Guatemala. In the period 1994–99, annual expenditure has been in the region of NOK 5–6 million, with four-fifths of this amount coming from NORAD or MFA sources. In this period, NCA have largely concentrated their support on providing core funding to two ecumenical organisations (CEPAD and CIEETS) plus funding to two smaller Christian organisations working in the field of health and education (AMC and ILFE[CHS4]). The nature of NCA support to partners is changing, with a move away from providing core organisational funding towards funding specific project activities. This shift is raising a number of key issues about the nature of partnership for NCA and the Nicaraguan counterparts.

SAIH – The Students' and Academics' International Aid Fund

SAIH was established in 1961 under the slogan "Education for Liberation". Being a solidarity organisation, SAIH puts equal weight on information work in Norway and activities abroad. The members are students' organisations and trade unions, with no individual membership. SAIH has branches in about ten major cities and an office in Oslo.

SAIH has been involved in the Caribbean Coast since 1980, in fact the SAIH health team sent to RAAN in 1980 was the first Norwegian development assistance present in Nicaragua. During the 1980, SAIH was involved in health activities, permanently having a team of 2–4 doctors and nurses placed within the local health system in RAAN. Following an evaluation in 1994 the personnel assistance was scaled down and from 1997 SAIH has not had personnel in Nicaragua. Since the beginning of the 1990s, SAIH has increasingly directed the support to the education sector. SAIH has decided to work only at the Caribbean Coast, recognising the exclusion of the minority groups from the "official Nicaragua" and wanting to support existing NGOs and the University in their development efforts.

The annual turnover in 1999 was 20 Million NOK, of this 80% from NORAD. The annual turnover in Nicaragua in 1999 was 21/2 Million NOK, divided among 7 projects.

Redd Barna (RB) is a Children's Rights organisation that opened a programme of co-operation with and support to the Nicaraguan Government and to Nicaraguan NGOs in 1987. Its foundation in Nicaragua was very much inspired by the solidarity between Norwegian people and the Sandinista government that throughout the 1980s was threatened with American intervention. RB very quickly built up a network of contacts and alliances among Nicaraguan NGOs and the broader Civil Society movement yet maintained its contacts with the Liberal governments that dominated Nicaraguan politics in the 1990s. RB currently works with 36 Partners in Nicaragua on a whole series of problems and issues related to caring for and defending the Rights and interests of children. It has always combined a balance between a project base of direct support to Children's Rights organisations as well support for broader movements that seek to defend and to promote the Rights of children. Currently, however, its budget is in decline and it has to adjust to changing circumstances. Future strategy is on the agenda and RB is seeking to maintain the balance of its work in a situation of declining resources.

LAHF was established in 1989 when a group of people left the 'Latin America Groups' because of disagreements. It is a volunteer group, based on a core of activists doing different types of work. LAHF has had the same Director since 1989. Currently LAHF supports projects in Chile, Cuba and Nicaragua. In the period 1994–1999, LAHF has been involved in 4 projects in Nicaragua: two with strengthening of women's group and two health related. Presently they have 2 projects: (a) The Health Infrastructure Project in Estelí, which has a Norwegian Co-ordinator and (b) a Women's project in Managua. As an other activity, LAHF collects, organises and sends containers with hospital equipment, computers and emergency help to different places in the 3 countries. The annual turnover for 1999 was NOK 4m of which NOK 2m is spent in Nicaragua. LAHF gets 50% of its funds from Norad.

CARE is a major international NGO with support bases in some ten developed countries, including Norway. CARE has a small Child Sponsorship Programme, a slightly larger Food Aid Programme; but the greatest part of its work is done under contract to international donors across a broad range of development projects. CARE International has first worked in Nicaragua in 1966 and CARE-Norway has been supporting development work there since the early 1980s. The CARE-PAS project in Nicaragua, that began in 1994, is the only one that CARE Norway currently has in the Americas and in 1998 CARE took a strategic decision to withdraw and to plan an exit from the project by the end of 2000. The project is called the Sustainable Agriculture Project (PAS) and involved high intensity work in technical support, extension advise, revolving credit, erosion control and the promotion of community-based organisations. CARE's basic exit strategy is based on the grouping of the families with which it has worked in a number of communities into Credit and Service Co-operatives that would take responsibility for maintaining the dynamic of community development. A final evaluation of the PAS was being undertaken during our visit.

The Royal Norwegian Society for Development (SNV) was established in 1809. Its total membership is currently approximately 1.3 million. That would be equivalent to about one-quarter of Norway's population! The thematic areas of focus of SNV in Nicaragua are Institutional Support to the Small Farmer Organisation UNAG as well as to co-operatives, both of which operate with a strong gender focus. SNV has worked with UNAG in Region IV since 1988 in three distinct project phases. The latest covered the period 1994–98. That project has since been closed, but a very similar programme has now been started up in another region: Leon, Boaco and Managua.

The Norwegian Union of Teachers (NL) was founded in 1892 and in 1966 it merged with three other unions. NL is the largest union for teachers in Norway with 90,000 members. It has been engaged in long-term development co-operation since 1979. NL's work is based on the development of strong, democratic and independent unions for teachers in the South. Co-operation between NL and CGTEN-ANDEN in Nicaragua started in 1985. The two organisations have co-operated on three projects; trade union training, gender and CDI Bluefields. The latter was a kindergarten project in Bluefields that came to an end in 2000. The project also made it possible for CGTEN-ANDEN to keep the kindergarten building for union activities in the region.

Annex 4 The Nicaraguan Context

Introduction

Nicaragua has a strategic geographical position in Central America that has caused a succession of world powers to take an interest in it for the past two centuries. According to the 1995 census the population of Nicaragua stands at just under 4.6 million inhabitants. In the last 20 years the population has seen drastic changes affecting the social and cultural make-up of the country. Official statistics for 1996 show that some 53.6% of the population of Nicaragua lived in a state of chronic poverty. A more recent study in 2000 by the WFP suggested that 80% of the population lived in chronic poverty and some 44% on less than US\$1 per day. Demographic indicators from FUNAP (1998) for the years 1995–2000 put the growth rate at 2.6%, which is higher than the 1.9% for the rest of Central America. The fertility rate is 3.85%, which is 0.81% above the other countries, and infant mortality is the highest in the region at 44 per 1,000 live births. Furthermore the rate of pregnancy in girls aged 15–19, stands at 149 per 1,000. Life expectancy from birth is the lowest in Central America: 70.6 years for women and 65.8 for men. Overall the country's population profile has a strong concentration of people aged up to and 24 years.

After many years of social unrest, a social and political revolution broke out in 1979 and ended 45 years of the Somoza dictatorship. It was led by the FSLN in alliance with a broad range of social groups. Although the 1980s saw an essentially centralised state, the 1987 constitutional reforms gave municipalities some say in national development. However, these changes were severely limited by the internal conflict in the 1980s that was brought about by attempts, aided by the USA, to overthrow the country's legitimate Sandinista government and generally to destabilise it.

The first democratic elections after the 1979 revolution were held in 1990. The FSLN lost, and the new government was made up of a collection of different political sectors opposed

to *Sandinismo*. The six years of President Chamorro's administration were conducted in a highly polarised context and have been seen as a transition period, marked by rural violence, urban insecurity and an increase in poverty levels. However, there was also a strong growth of civil society organisations. Under pressure from international financial institutions, policies of deregulation were agreed and the country entered into a lengthy period of structural adjustment policies, all of which had a negative effect on the economic lives of the majority of Nicaraguans. In 1996 the incoming government of President Aleman determined to continue to implement the economic measures negotiated with the international finance organisations. At present Nicaragua is about to enter the inevitable turbulence of an election as a new President will be elected in November 2001.

Economic Situation and Crisis

Throughout the 1990s Nicaragua saw changes in economic and social policies that resulted in a harsher and more financially disciplined economic environment. The results of this can be seen in the initial recuperation of certain indicators, such as the GNP which has been rising since 1990, and also in the disappearance of programmes such as funding for small production businesses and rural credit. Unemployment has risen and the State has largely abandoned its role in the provision of public services. Between 1995–96 it is estimated that unemployment reached 11.8% of the economically active population. A reduction in national debt and an increase in exports, which reached US\$ 444million in 1994, accompanied the growth in GNP (BID: 1995). However, factors such as the end of the armed conflict, the improvement of economic indicators and the implementation of measures imposed by multinational organisations to reduce national debt have not resulted in better economic conditions for most of the population. In 1999 the GNP stood at US\$ 2,400 million, which translates to an income per head of US\$ 490.

This year inflation is around 15%, and formal and informal employment are much higher than the mid-1990s. Interest rates currently average 19% annually.

The fall in international prices including coffee, tobacco, sugar and soya in the last three years has contributed to a fall of economic activity for those working in agricultural exportation. Combined with the financial imbalances caused by debt and its effects on producers and businesses, and the poor administration of certain financial institutions, have been the cause of an economic recession, threatening the financial stability of Nicaragua. A large part of the responsibility for this must fall with the Bank Supervisory Body for not taking measures against the inefficiencies and the lack of transparency of the banking system. The collapse of two financial institutions in late 2000 – Interbank and Banco del Café – suggests that the State has been supporting private savings which in turn affects the level of international reserves. Various analysts predict that the economy will contract strongly in 2001, even though official predictions state that this year will see 4–4.5% growth, and next year just above 2%. This represents a sharp turn around for a country that saw 7% growth in 1999, and this is likely to cause a reduction in credit, a fall in production, a rise in interest rates and unpredictability in price levels. In this context, the problems of the Government have been aggravated by increasing public criticism over the management of public resources, the lack of transparency in the privatisation of public services, the purchase of businesses by senior civil servants and officials, frequent scandals over corruption and the high salaries earned by public officials.

In Nicaragua the financial and commercial sectors have for long been seen as the stable elements in the economy. However, in the last five years six state and commercial banks have folded: BECA, BANADES, Banco SUR, Banco Popular, INTERBANK and Banco del Café. This chain of disasters has highlighted a number of problems which must be tackled: the fragility of the private financial sector; the absence of the

State as a regulator of financial and commercial policies; and the consequences of a government which places the interests of the State institutions before the interests of economic pressure groups. Without doubt the blame for the banks' collapse lies with their respective management boards and executives as there appears to be strong evidence of bad management and fraud, although so far no punishment has been meted out. This again illustrates the government's responsibility to supervise the financial sector, and the need for a revision of the weak powers of the official supervising body and the mechanisms it is able to use. In the final analysis, the State support offered to Interbank and Banco del Café upset the Banco Central and affected the public finances of the country.

Poverty and Poverty Alleviation Strategies

After various failed attempts the Nicaraguan Government now has a *Reinforced Strategy to Reduce Poverty*, which is based on economic development with particular emphasis on rural areas where poverty is more widespread and more intense. It also contains a significant level of investment in basic social infrastructure and some actions designed to help those particularly vulnerable to extreme poverty. The strategy is very much based on donor support. According to FUNAP, the *Reinforced Strategy to Reduce Poverty* will soon become the backbone of national efforts in the area of development and external co-operation. The strategy establishes aims for 2005 within the framework of international aims to halve world poverty by half by the year 2015. Each aim refers to a different aspect of poverty, but they come together to form a unified whole. For this reason progress is made on each aim simultaneously. The thread linking progress towards the aims is without doubt the improvement of living conditions for women and their enjoyment of conditions equal to those of men, based on the fulfilment and guarantee of their rights.

Nicaragua will only achieve the aims set out by the Government's poverty strategy and the subsequent possibility of sustainable

development if it achieves the specific goals set for 2005. These are: (a) to reduce extreme poverty by 25%; (b) to increase school attendance by 85%; (c) to reduce maternal mortality to 129 per 100,000 live births; (d) to reduce infant mortality to 32 per 1,000 live births; (e) to reduce unsatisfied demand for family planning to 18% or 25%; (f) to reduce chronic malnutrition in under 5s to 13%; (g) to increase access to drinking water to 75%; (h) to increase access to sanitation to 50%; and (I) to implement a sustainable development strategy by 2005.

The agricultural sector is a major sector within the Nicaraguan economy and it is currently in a difficult situation. The majority of Nicaraguans continue to live – either wholly or in part – off the land and the country shows the pattern of skewed distribution of land that is typical of most Central American countries. The increased mechanisation of the larger holdings results in less demand for agricultural labour and more migration to the cities. Those that remain push back the agricultural frontier, exploit marginal land and increase the damage to forest resources. Environmental destruction and its relation to the standard of living of poor populations in rural areas is shown in indiscriminate tree felling and inappropriate cultivation practices in order to obtain firewood and food.

The government, the international community and civil society organisations are all paying increasing roles in national development. For example, the Stockholm declaration shows that one of the objectives of the reconstruction following the destruction left by Hurricane Mitch is the consolidation of democracy and authority by supporting moves to decentralise the functions of government and increase the active participation of civil society. However, there has still been no policy to transfer public sector duties to local government or any financial reforms to aid this institutional change.

Nicaraguan Civil Society

It could be said that the consolidation of democracy, the construction of an articulate civil society and the fight against poverty are the major challenges facing Nicaragua today. Even with the advances made in the democratic process during the elections of the 1990s, the political system is still fragile and vulnerable. The democratisation of politics, which emphasises civic representation, is being undertaken without a democratic culture, civil participation or economic and social development. The democratic model has so far ignored the increasing social and economic inequality and the subsequent problems of extreme poverty, ecological crisis, increased migration and discrimination against women and indigenous groups. As the country passes through successive electoral periods it also passes through stages like “the reform of the State” and “the liberalisation of the market” without bringing about any real changes in the lives of the poor. Corruption, impunity and public incompetence are the results of weak institutions and the lack of democratic values.

It is clear also that the agricultural-exportation economic model is in crisis. Although the government claims that macro economic analysis shows some success – 5% growth last year – this does not signify a consolidation towards sustainable economic growth, which would show increased employment, education, better health services and more equal distribution of wealth. The public debate on sustainable and human development over the last 5 years has not yet been expressed in the construction and implementation of economic, social and legislative structures to facilitate models of sustainable development and overcome the grave social and territorial inequalities. Although there is now more and more varied participation by the people in public life, the increasing lack of confidence in the political parties means that many important social groups are not involved in the political processes that affect their lives.

Nicaraguan documentation sees civil society as including all organisations that represent

private interests and that have total independence from the State; social movements, unions, community organisations and other diverse organisations such as NGOs. Civil society constitutes a vital element in the consolidation of democracy but we recognise that in Nicaragua civil society is still in the process of formation. Today, Nicaraguan civil society still appears weak, dispersed and with an agenda that is either inarticulate or poorly projected. However, that is not to say that there are no important achievements, sustained efforts or initiatives coming from certain social actors which do dynamise the democratic and socio-economic processes. Indeed, never before has Nicaragua seen such a proliferation of civil society organisations with such diversity of actions, focus, proposals and achievements. These are a combination of NGOs, social movements, pressure groups and media that together total nearly 3,000 organisations. It is worth noting that this phenomenon is largely due to the high level of international co-operation existing in Nicaragua today, especially the non-governmental co-operation.

It is important to place any analysis of civil society organisations in Nicaragua in the context of the process of democratisation that began in the 1990s. This influenced the traditional structures of social organisation, which had before been dominated by popular organisations and guilds. The increase and participation of other civil society organisations such as NGOs is associated with the new agendas brought by international governments and organisations to Nicaragua after the end of conflict and violence. The new stabilisation and adjustment policies, combined with efforts to institutionalise citizen's rights and strengthen the new democratic electoral systems, and the socio-economic effects of the adjustment policies have created a new economic and social environment. In this new environment NGOs in particular have increasingly taken on activities which were before under the remit of the State.

Social problems have been aggravated by the reduction of the State's responsibility for social services, the effects of privatisation, the

liberalisation of the economy and the effects of globalisation on a country with a limited ability to compete. Such problems include: displacement and migration, insecurity and violence, social and public corruption, the break-up of the rural textile industry and, linked to all of these, the rapid destruction of natural resources and territorial inequalities. In these circumstances the theme of development takes on a new dimension and a new importance for the international community. This tendency was reinforced by the Hurricane Mitch Emergency Programme that revealed the social, economic and ecological vulnerability of Nicaragua. This partly explains the birth of new civil society organisations around the issues of development, democratisation and governability. Nicaraguan NGOs are in a boom period and the old social movements are generally in decline. International co-operation has become a major player at national level and new actors are emerging such as indigenous groups, women and local communities. Nicaraguan society as a whole has become a diverse mixture of interests and groupings, combining old and new movements and players.

However, it is not certain that the "democratic" changes supposedly taking place in Nicaragua today are ensuring the genuine participation of people in society. Genuine participation needs multiple actors at different levels. However, it is important to recognise the contribution of civil society to democratisation through its various organisations, including social movements, voluntary guilds with or without legal representation, NGOs, grassroots organisations, self-help groups, associations of indigenous groups and religious organisations.

Nicaraguan NGOs

Over the past decade or so Nicaraguan NGOs have come to assume important roles in the country's development. They are very varied, and most cover a variety of development issues within their broad mission. It is possible to signal two main groups: **operational NGOs** that principally design and carry out development projects; and **politically active**

NGOs that principally defend or promote a cause and aim to influence policy-making. Currently Nicaraguan NGOs experience various problems, the most significant of which is a growing dependence on international co-operation agencies for resources. Levels of

organisational development and the capacity to achieve sustainability and credibility are varied. Studies suggest that there might be up to 3,000 national NGOs in Nicaragua. The following table presents an overall profile of a smaller number that were surveyed last year:

Profile of Nicaraguan NGOs				
Areas of Interest	Number	Range Municipal	Departmental	National
Ethnicity	18	0	18	0
Human Rights	54	2	47	5
Gender/Family	112	1	97	14
Children/Youth	91	2	79	10
Health/rehab	69	2	61	6
Culture	39	1	37	1
Ecology	77	3	70	4
Agriculture & Fishing	62	1	55	6
Alternative Credit	58	0	52	6
Housing	32	0	29	3

Source: NGO Directory, CAPRI 2000

Of the sample of over 600 NICNGOs the vast majority work essentially at the departmental level, while less than 10% work exclusively at the national level. However we can probably assume that many of the departmental NGOs will be involved in alliances or networks that function also at the national level. In development terms, the NICNGOs surveyed would appear to spread quite conventionally across the various sectors and to have a solid welfare/service delivery bias. Apart from the above statistical summary few – if any – studies exist on NICNGOs collectively as development actors and, likewise, we can assume a fairly heterogeneous collection of organisations ranging from the highly professional development agencies to others that deliver services in a limited context. The “dynamic” section of NICNGO society is probably quite small and it is with this section that most NNGOs interact.

There is much competition for international co-operation resources that causes many Nicaraguan NGOs to become involved in a whole range of socio-economic development initiatives, but often without acknowledging their own strengths, limitations and the political focus of the co-operation policies that accompany the resources. Another issue is the

potential division that their presence can cause in communities, as a result of a lack of co-ordination between them. Some communities are saturated with international NGOs and their local partner organisations. These divisions can affect the natural social fabric of the communities and the identity and independence of their own social organisations.

International NGOs Working in Nicaragua

Most Nicaraguan civil society organisations and the majority of international NGOs work in the area of sustainable development. They see this as an integrated process encompassing poverty, environment, human rights, childhood, gender and vulnerability. It is also as linked to the construction of citizenship, the development of civil society and an increase in democracy. In Nicaragua there are over 100 environmental projects alone from different co-operation agencies. It is important to recognise both the many positive experiences of these projects, but also the difficulties caused by the variety of policies and intervention that the projects develop. There are also over 150 international NGOs in the country. The following table illustrates the range of their work:As we can see

Profile of International NGOs working in Nicaragua				
Areas of Interest	Number	Municipal	Departmental	National
Ethnicity	2	0	2	0
Human Rights	18	0	16	2
Gender/ Family	36	0	33	3
Children/ Youths	40	1	38	1
Health/ Rehabilitation	41	2	36	3
Culture	9	1	7	1
Ecology	38	2	33	3
Agriculture and fishing	45	0	43	2
Alternative credit	29	0	29	0
Housing	19	0	19	0

Source: Capri, 2000

the majority of the international NGOs work within the main sectors of development: health, agriculture, children and environment and with notable concerns for gender issues and human rights. This is a fairly common profile of international NGO communities in Latin America, with the mixture of production / services with concern for broader issues such as Rights and Gender. What the table does not show are the many more qualitative aims – democratisation, participation, community organisation – that are often as critical as the immediate objectives of some of the more tangible objectives. Certainly in respect of the Norwegian NGOs working in Nicaragua, there is strong evidence that they combine broader organisational and “political” objectives within the context of their sectoral projects.

Legal Framework Governing International NGOs

Law 147, entitled “General Law Governing Not-for-Profit Organisations” regulates both the national and international NGOs working on development issues in Nicaragua. This law, passed by the National Assembly in 1992, makes no difference in the norms regulating the presence and operation of national and international NGOs. Moreover, it applies indiscriminately to all organisations and institutions that make up civil society. The concept of a not-for-profit body includes organisations ranging from a typical NGO to religious groups, sports societies and others. The law is extremely general, and contains no

obligation beyond that of registering with the government as a public institution and providing financial accounts. The objective is to “*regulate the constitution, authorisation, functions and termination of legal civil and religious not-for-profit bodies already existing in the country and that emerge in the future.*” However, the dominant position of international NGOs and the nature of their work means that the government is not the most appropriate body to regulate them.

The gap left by this law has been filled by “Co-operation Agreements” between the international NGOs and their governments via the Ministry of External Relations, specifically the Secretary of Economic Relations and Co-operation. However, international NGOs are still worried about their legal security in the country. This worry, which is an issue that was raised during this study, is caused by the problems of governability facing the country at the present time. In particular international NGOs are concerned about differences of opinion and conflict between the Nicaraguan government and the international co-operation community. The international NGOs have therefore proposed a framework agreement that would fill the gap in regulation and legal security. This is a result of negotiations with the Secretariat which links the Secretaries for Economic Relations and for Co-operation, who has assured that his approval is only waiting the go-ahead from the Ministry for External Relations.

The proposal lays out mutual responsibilities and includes a clause relating to tax law that was negotiated with the General Management of the Ministry of Business and Public Credit. It also obliges the NGOs to inform the government of their activities, including general details of their projects, and co-ordinate with the relevant government Ministries. The responsibilities of the NGOs include: professional and technical training for Nicaraguan staff; donation of materials and imported equipment for development projects; non-reimbursable financial investment in development projects and the sending of professional and technical staff to Nicaragua. The agreement also frees NGOs from paying tax to the government. It also makes reference to the resolution of conflicts, validity, time frame of operations and final outcomes. However these proposals are currently filed away and off the government's agenda probably until after the next presidential election.

Concluding Comments

International NGOs have made – and continue to make – an important contribution to assist Nicaragua face the challenges of development. One immediate difficulty, however, is measuring this impact in quantitative terms. The situation is made even more difficult by several current critical aspects of the Nicaraguan economy: government macro economic measures, deregulation of the economy, the negative

impact of globalisation and the reduction of the State's role. Other difficulties are caused by a lack of efficient co-ordination of support policies. This situation limits the impact of the work and creates dispersal and fragmentation of potential improvements to beneficiaries. It is also caused by a lack of communication between official co-operation, non-governmental co-operation, and the development activities promoted by international financial organisations.

Nicaragua does not have a clear legal framework for the presence of international NGOs. Their insecurity and legal vulnerability are linked to the problem of political polarisation and the lack of rights allowed by the Nicaraguan government. Norwegian NGOs do not escape this situation. In the short-term it is to be expected that this situation will continue, due to the intense political period into which the country is about to enter in 2001 with presidential elections. It is likely that the regulation of Law 147, or the creation of a new law exclusively for international NGOs or the approval for the proposal for a framework agreement, will be off the agenda until 2002. In this respect NNGOs might feel particularly vulnerable since, along with other Nordic countries, they form one of the few substantial blocks of international NGOs that do not operate within the context of a bilateral agreement between their government and that of Nicaragua.

Annex 5 Overall Profile of Norwegian NGO Support to Nicaragua: 1994–99

Norwegian Development Assistance through NORAD, 1994–1999 (NOK 1000)

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	Total
Total bilateral assistance	3 073 458	3 145 376	3 392 481	3 749 231	3 797 193	3 706 477	
Nicaragua share of this	114 538	88 580	113 757	99 724	92 814	105 344	614 775
NGO share of total assistance	809 668	927 084	951 735	1 074 568	1 183 595	1 266 105	
Nicaragua share of this	41 028	45 702	45 031	46 854	43 854	42 678	265 113

NGO share of total Norwegian bilateral assistance, 1994–1999 = 30 percent

NGO share of total assistance to Nicaragua, 1994–1999 = 43 percent

Source: Data provided by NORAD's Budget and Statistics Division

NGO Disbursements as a Total of Norwegian Bilateral Aid to Nicaragua, 1994–99

Support to Nicaragua through Norwegian NGOs, 1994–1999 (NOK 1000)

	Type	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	1994–99	Percent	Grants
Atlas	F	382	324		387	340	123	1556	0,7%	5
CARE	F	4202	4672	4761	3156	4829	3079	24699	11,0%	10
SNV	F	2975	2950	1662	2026	7461	3449	20523	9,1%	10
FOKUS	F						301	301	0,1%	1
KN	Pgr	4689	5091	5457	4864	6885	4028	31014	13,8%	30
LO	F	720	445	280	272	377	351	2445	1,1%	8
LAG	IA	892	473	842	197			2404	1,1%	8
LAHF	IA		605	1094	1616	2478	1331	7124	3,2%	10
LUG/MSF	IA					370	327	697	1,3%	1
NAFO	IA	508	348	504	403	332	150	2245	1,0%	8
NBF	F	1588	1174	254				3016	1,3%	7
NF	F	3894	4389	5032	4879	5641	7089	30924	13,7%	67
NL	F	291	362	472	401	368	354	2248	1,0%	17
BN	F	1720	477	271				2468	1,1%	4
NU	F	22	455	424	639			1540	0,7%	6
RB	Pgr	8239	11050	9015	9615	8931	13763	60613	26,9%	132
SAIH	F	878	2319	2695	3252	3413	2475	15032	6,7%	30
UTVF	F	2235	2429	2613	2466	2618	2377	14738	6,5%	26
YME	IA	129						129	0,1%	1
Other		70	543	728	224	132	42	1739	0,8%	23
Total		33434	38106	36104	34397	44175	39239	225455	100,0%	404

Notes: The acronyms of the NGOs are those used in the Norwegian language

The types refer to the following: F = framwork, Pgr = programme, and IA = individual application

Source: Raw data provided by NORAD's Budget and Statistics Division

Annex 6 Documentation and Bibliography

The major part of the literature consulted for this study consisted of documentation prepared by NNGOs and NICNGOs both on their work in general and, more specifically, on the fourteen projects visited. This documentation broke down into four main areas:

- the original project proposal stating the development problem to be addressed
- examples of periodic or annual reports showing the progress of the project
- documents relating to any formal evaluations undertaken of the project
- other useful documents including NNGO Strategy Papers, Issue Papers or other studies that we felt were relevant to our overall tasks

The quantity of this documentation varied among the NNGOs. We were able to get basic documentation on the first two areas from all but one of the NNGOs, but the documentation on the other two areas varied enormously. In general terms, understandably, it was the bigger NNGOs whose documentation included papers related to strategy and other key variables. Interestingly we found very few examples of external evaluations of the projects studied although most project proposals refer to an evaluation as being built into the project cycle. Since the full list of this documentation is over 80 we have decided not to include it in full here but merely to outline its content.

In terms of other **bibliography** consulted, this is as follows:

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Annex 7 List of Persons met

During the course of the evaluation exercise, we met with more than a hundred people from different organisations and communities. With some we had one-to-one or group discussions and with others we met them during the course of a visit to an organisation or a project. In order, therefore, not to have too an extensive list of people met, we include here only those colleagues and community representatives with whom we had some substantial discussions and whose individual views might well be reflected in our report.

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Mildred Mikkelsen, project coordinator, LAHF
Isaura Gonzales, project agronomist, LAHF
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