United We Stand: ICDF Cooperation with the OAS in Nicaragua

ICDF cooperation with other international organizations yields rich rewards, accentuating constructive work in partner nations, and stimulating vibrant teamwork between the ICDF and other aid groups.

The ICDF’s management of the Republic of China’s economic and social assistance programs worldwide encompasses technical work in agriculture and animal husbandry, lending and investment programs, education and training development, and emergency assistance. In the course of these complex operations, the ICDF must nurture productive, cooperative relationships with many different local, state and international organizations. The ICDF recognizes that cooperation with international development organizations, particularly, can result in fruitful operational synergies, while expanding the scope and amplifying the effects of assistance programs. Working together, international groups with substantial resources can prevent the duplication of efforts, promote more consistent aid policies, permit greater planning flexibility and efficiency, and enhance the likelihood of securing financing for large projects. Each organization involved can also benefit, with shared knowledge and experience bolstering staff skills for future projects, and cooperative work strengthening organizational image and effectiveness. Over the decades, the ICDF has collaborated with, among other organizations, the Asian Development Bank, the African Development Bank, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, the Inter-American Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Trade Organization. One of the most successful recent examples of ICDF cooperation with an international organization has been its work with the Organization of American States (OAS) in Nicaragua in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. Through their cooperative work on the Housing Solidarity Reconstruction Program of the North-Central Region of Nicaragua, the ICDF and OAS with help from the Nicaraguan government and other
aid organizations have made an invaluable contribution to Nicaraguan reconstruction and social development.

Hurricane Mitch ferociously struck Central America in late October 1998. Its estimated 10—12,000 deaths and extensive destruction of homes, croplands and country infrastructure made it one of the five worst Atlantic hurricanes in history. Nicaragua lost over 3,000 people, and more than 85 percent of the country's highway system was destroyed during the storm. Five hundred twelve rural Nicaraguan schools and 112 health centers were also destroyed. Taiwan had a delegation in Central America within days of the catastrophe, and by November 1998 the ICDF had set up a mission to appraise the damage. The ICDF went to work with the OAS, and in December 1998 a US$3 million loan was arranged, to be distributed through the OAS, and monitored by the Nicaraguan Technical Secretariat of the Presidency. Work immediately began on housing reconstruction in the destroyed communities of Wiwilí, Quilalí, and Paiwas in northern and central Nicaragua.

The ICDF's work with the OAS on this project was by no means incidental. The OAS, under the leadership of Secretary General César Gaviria, has an established on the ground presence in Latin America, and its credibility and resources were of critical importance early in the disaster. Hurricane Mitch had destroyed most local governmental institutions, and citizens desperately needed guidance and leadership. The OAS provided this, as did the government of Nicaragua and the ICDF. Prompt visits by personnel from these institutions to distressed areas early in the disaster have become part of local folklore. The OAS also has a firm understanding of the physical needs and cultural propensities of the people of Latin America, and extensive experience in social and infrastructure development in the region. This experience, combined with the ICDF's financial resources and desire to aid the people of Nicaragua, have proven to be a powerfully effective combination. An ancient Chinese proverb reads, Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. It was with this approach in mind that the ICDF, the OAS and the Nicaraguan government with ample assistance from the World Food Program (WFP), which implemented a food for work plan got down to work in December 1998. Early on, the groups realized that reconstruction of the three townships would have to go beyond merely rebuilding homes as they had been before the disaster. The people of these remote towns had developed communities based on widely separated, frequently overcrowded houses, built for the sake of convenience near rivers that could overrun their banks. Housing was therefore inherently unsafe, and
community structures and services were dispersed. During reconstruction, the rectification of these defects was a key part of overall planning.

During reconstruction, according to a report by the Technical Secretariat of the Presidency and the OAS, a culture of joint active work was nurtured among the afflicted communities, replacing the passive welfare and dispersed nature of previous communities. Housing Commissions comprised of mayors, town councils and citizens oversaw local reconstruction. Squads of working men and women (helped by the communities children) worked cooperatively on construction projects, receiving valuable work skills and community development training. New social leadership, much stronger and more cohesive than before the hurricane, emerged. These social benefits complement the physical infrastructure work done by community members and the organizations involved safer, larger housing was built (houses are larger, with two bedrooms, a separate kitchen with an environmentally improved cook stove, cement floors, and a latrine); communities were brought into closer proximity, with easy access to water facilities, health care, and other institutions; housing was relocated away from river banks (improved water facilities allowed for this); and communities were improved with new walkways, open spaces and recreation areas.

The end result of this program, when its first 838 homes were completed in August 2000, was much more than the reconstruction of houses lost to Hurricane Mitch. It was, said Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Aleman, a transformation of Nicaraguan rural life. The government of Nicaragua and grateful residents of Wiwil, Quilal, and Paiwas unveiled a plaque in Wiwil in August 1999 to commemorate the project. Phase II of the project has been agreed upon, signed and gets underway in 2001. Residents in the provinces of Jinotega and Nueva Segovia, and the autonomous regions of Raas and Raan will benefit from the same self-help approach that was so successful in Phase I. The highly cooperative approach of the ICDF, OAS, WFP and the Nicaraguan government has truly enabled people in Nicaragua to start their lives anew safer and sturdier than ever before.

Photographer: Raoul Shade, courtesy of OAS.