

Evaluation of Poverty Reduction
Strategies in Latin America – 2006
Executive Summary

Nicaragua: Poverty Postponed



Preface

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) process was designed as a response to growing concerns about high and seemingly permanent levels of poverty in many development countries. The process seeks to achieve sustained and significant poverty reduction with the implementation of country-specific medium-term poverty reduction plans, each of which is created through a national participatory process. Donors are expected to support national poverty reduction plans with resources and debt relief.

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) contracted the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) to monitor and evaluate this process in three Latin American countries – Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua – between 2003 and 2007. The reports produced by ISS are independent assessments that do not necessarily represent the views of Sida staff.

Each year, the ISS team (which includes both ISS staff members and local consultants) prepares three country reports, a regional report that compares experiences in the three countries, and a thematic report that looks in depth at one particular topic. The analysis in the reports is based on a combination of interviews with stakeholders at the national and subnational level and analysis of secondary sources and data.

The 2006 country and regional reports provide an update of the status of the PRS process and examine whether the process has strengthened downward accountability systems. The 2006 thematic report is on the subject of gender and the PRS process. In past years, the reports have addressed participatory processes, pro-poor growth, decentralization, results-oriented budgeting, local economic development, and cost-effectiveness in primary education spending. Aid effectiveness and rural development will be the subject of the 2007 reports. All reports can be downloaded at www.iss.nl/prsp.

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Executive Summary of Country Report – Nicaragua 2006

"Nicaragua: Poverty Postponed"

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1. Introduction

In 2006, poverty has once again been a problem postponed. Politically, the presidential election has monopolized public attention; economically the PND has stressed growth over poverty reduction; financially, the first priority has been strengthening the country's financial situation by increasing international reserves, paying foreign debt and reducing the Central Bank's indebtedness to the national financial system. The government has continued its policy of giving priority to the creation of conditions favoring growth, without paying attention to the nature of that growth and without much concern for poverty.

The special theme of this report is government accountability towards the citizens (or downward accountability). It is concerned, in particular, with the question of whether and to what extent the ERCERP, the PND and all the processes associated with them have contributed to improving that accountability, at the national and local levels.

The political situation has been characterized by a decrease in the confrontations between the Powers of State which was associated with a shift in the priorities of the political parties, now more focused on the November elections. From the economic point of view, the situation has been characterized by a slowing down of economic growth, with a growth rate of some 3 percent which had a negligible impact on unemployment, and by a continuation of the efforts to maintain economic stability and to strengthen the position of international reserves. Finally, from the social point of view there are preliminary indications that poverty has increased from 2001 to 2005; equally seriously, the net enrollment rate in primary education, which constitutes both an indicator of current poverty and an important factor of future poverty, has fallen.

2. Political, Economic and Social Context

Political Conditions

The political and social scene in 2005 was marked by conflicts: strikes of teachers and of medical personnel in public employment demanding salary increases, a strike of the Managua bus companies to demand subsidies to compensate for increases in fuel prices, and 10 months of conflicts between the Powers of State, especially between the National Assembly and the Executive. Some social indicators have experienced a decline during this period. A return to stability was achieved by means of a Framework Law towards the end of the last quarter of 2005, which also made it easier for the country to realign itself with the IMF programme, as the National Assembly approved a handful of laws relating to the structural reform of the economy.

The country's regulatory systems showed signs of a crisis. The most serious manifestation of this problem was the energy crisis, which entailed power cuts lasting up to eight hours in various parts of the country, causing huge losses to the national economy. There was a serious lack of coordination between the power distributing company, Unión Fenosa, and the public regulator, the Nicaraguan Institute of Energy, with mutual complaints and accusations and, at the same time, a complete absence of government initiatives to deal with the power shortages facing the country.

The political situation was dominated by the elections of the November 5th, which gave victory to Daniel Ortega. Prominent Nicaraguan entrepreneurs have insisted in private that in their opinion the Sandinista candidate is aware of the reality within which he will carry out his presidential mandate, and that they consider it very unlikely that Mr. Ortega will adopt a policy of hostility towards the private sector.

Economic Performance in 2006

Economic growth shows clear signs of slowing down, international aid has increased but remains conditional on the structural reforms of the IMF economic programme, public investment has fallen and private investors were clearly less active, especially in the financial market, as they waited for the election results. With the new total population figure of 5,142,098 inhabitants, nominal GDP *per capita* for 2006 is approximately US\$1,025.

The deficit in the current account of the balance of payments remains stable around 14% of GDP. Foreign aid is expected to amount to US\$593 million if the macroeconomic targets and especially the structural

reforms included in the IMF programme are reached. Nicaragua has obtained a new reduction of its foreign debt, thanks to the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative, of the US\$202 million and US\$694 million that it owed to the IMF and the World Bank (WB/IDA), respectively. This will make more budgetary resources available for moving towards the Millennium Development Goals.

Fiscal and monetary policy continue to be 'more of the same': contraction of the fiscal deficit, before external donations are recorded, to a level close to 6.0% of GDP (in current prices) and a rate of growth of the money supply that closely tracks the growth of GDP. In its zeal to impose extremely orthodox targets (even in an election year in a poor and indebted country like as Nicaragua), the IMF made international aid in liquid currency to support the balance of payments conditional upon structural reforms such as reforming the Tax Code, drawing up a detailed strategy and implementation plan for the reform of the social security pension system, reforming the Law on Municipal Transfers to achieve fiscal neutrality, among others. There are serious delays in some of these structural reforms.

Social Conditions

Preliminary and unofficial results from the Standard of Living Survey of 2005 indicate that Nicaragua's human poverty has grown between 2001 and 2005. Inequality in the distribution of income continues to grow. This apparent deterioration in the situation has occurred despite the fact that in recent years the country has received considerable flows of official development aid supposedly to help fight poverty, and has benefited from substantial relief of its external debt, freeing resources that were also supposed to be used to reduce poverty.

Poverty reduction expenditure grew from 11.9% of GDP in 2004 to 13.0% of GDP in 2005, equivalent to US\$669.0 million, or 48.1% of total budget expenditure. In *per capita* terms, poverty reduction expenditure grew from US\$95 in 2004 to US\$110 in 2005 and is expected to grow further, to US\$113, in 2006. With the inclusion of productive investment in the new definition of poverty reduction expenditure, capital expenditure (especially in municipal and road infrastructure projects) – at US\$352.6 million or 55.3% of total poverty reduction expenditure – exceeded current expenditure. Current expenditure was concentrated on subsidies (to the consumption of electricity, drinking water and passenger transport in urban buses), salary increases and purchase of medicines, mainly financed from tax revenues. Furthermore, the social protection network was supported, children and vulnerable families in rural areas received assistance and indigenous communities were also helped. In comparison with 2004, the financing of total poverty reduction expenditure in 2005 relied more on tax revenues and foreign donations, and less on HIPC relief and foreign loans.

From the total amount of HIPC relief for 2005, only US\$121.2 million, or 52.6%, were used to finance poverty reduction projects; furthermore, this amount was not in addition to the ordinary social expenditure already incurred by the government. The remaining 43.7% of HIPC relief for 2005 was used to finance the repayment of the central government's domestic debt. The 2006 budget shows that the government continues not to assign the resources liberated by HIPC debt relief exclusively to projects in sectors such as education, health and environment, since it allocates only about 43% of HIPC relief to financing social expenditure.

3. Current Status of the PRSP Process

The latest version of the National Development Plan (PND), now for the period 2006–2010, was published in November 2005. Two changes seem significant: the PND is now openly designated as “PRSP II”, and the description of the national participation system has been revised. To the three axes of the participation system described in the PND 2005–2009 (technical-executive, political-administrative and participation-agreement), a fourth has now been added: “coordination with cooperation”. In other words, the dialogue with the donor community is now included in the National Participation System, taking as a basis for this dialogue ‘... the National Plan for Harmonization and Alignment of Aid, the sectoral roundtables and forms of development cooperation with the Nicaraguan State’.

Recent field research on the process of participation in the territories is rather critical of that process. Among other conclusions, this study by Vado (2006) claims that, more than being a broad process of participation involving a large number of diverse local actors, the process amounted to little more than a consultation in which local actors had very little chance to get involved and to influence, let alone control, decisions.

4. Institutional Strengthening

The CONPES Strengthened

The CONPES was in need of a substantial reform in order to recover its credibility. This reform did take place, in the form of decree No. 76–2005, dealing with the reorganization and functioning of the CONPES. For the first time, the Council has both sectoral and territorial representatives. Also for the first time, a sustained effort has started in the CONPES to strengthen its institutional relations with the Powers of State, on the one hand, and to incorporate and support proposals coming not only from its members but also from other civil society organizations. Another aspect that strengthens the CONPES is its position and role as the national level expression of the National Participation System, which is structured in three levels, national, departmental/regional and local) and in the four axes that were mentioned above.

Decentralization Policy

Another area of state modernization and renewal that has experienced some progress is the national decentralization policy, which underwent a sudden and interesting resurrection: the people in charge involved AMUNIC and the Network for Democracy and Local Development in the discussions, and the policy was reformulated in collaboration with these civil society organizations. The reformulated policy was approved by the government, signed by the President of the Republic and published in a decree in August 2006. The committee that had been working on the policy continued to work on the development of a proposal for a National Strategy for Decentralization and Local Development, to be subjected to a consultation process in the territories (which happened in September), with the purpose of improving it and having it approved still during this government's mandate. Finally, and on the basis of that strategy, the government wants to leave a draft National Programme for Decentralization and Local Development ready, which will spell out expected results in the short, medium and long term, the entities responsible, calendar of implementation and the resources necessary for the strategy's implementation. This action plan aims at bringing about local development and poverty reduction, for which it pursues the intermediate objective of improving governance. The plan has been proposed as a key instrument for harmonization and alignment of foreign assistance to local development, in line with the PND.

On another and more practical front, the decentralization process continued as the financial transfers to the municipalities increased and as public services were decentralized in the areas of social services and of and in the management of certain transactions with the state. Furthermore, with the help of the IMF, the government has studied ways in which central government responsibilities may be transferred to municipalities in order to achieve fiscal neutrality for the financial transfers to municipalities and to avoid financial shortfalls in the budget.

In the area of social services, decentralization also progressed thanks to the implementation of a pilot stage (for 17 municipalities in 9 departments) of the Rural Service Centers (CPS) strategy. The aim of this strategy is to bring social services closer to the poorer citizens and to those who live in dispersed and remote communities, far away from urban centers. The idea is to guide social investment towards those centers where it has already reached a certain level, that is, to strengthen and concentrate social services in a number of centers rather than disperse them. The selected centers will then be strengthened with equipment and infrastructure in health, water, waste disposal and social protection. This work of focusing investment in social services is being carried out in collaboration with municipal authorities. Another, complementary way of extending the services to peripheral populations is being introduced through the Units for the Provision of Integral Services. These are mobile units that move from locality to locality and provide services and help with family planning, training in family health care, prevention and detection of cervical and uterine cancer, dental services for children and adults, civic education, prevention of family violence and personal registration services.

Strengthening of Monitoring Systems

Work has continued in strengthening the monitoring and evaluation systems that form one of the most useful legacies of the present government and of the PRSP process. Among these systems, the most advanced are:

- The Integrated System for Financial Management and Audits (SIGFA), which has benefited from the Law on Financial Administration which makes compulsory its gradual extension to all decentralized and autonomous institutions from 2006 onwards; the SIGFA has been recognized by the National Assembly as the only official source for the monitoring of the budget; as the reform of public administration and finance proceeds, the SIGFA becomes integrated with various subsystems and connected with other related systems.
- The National System for Public Investments (SNIP), which has created the Technical Units for Public Investment in the departments, strengthened systems for the physical-financial monitoring of investment projects and progressed in the registration of all investment projects, in developing techniques for medium term budgeting and in the development of criteria for establishing priorities among the projects in its portfolio.
- The National Participation System (PASE), which as its name indicates has inherited the PASE programme and the territorial consultation process associated with the PND; in 2005, the PASE has spread information about the Departmental and Regional Development Plans and has helped create Departmental Development Councils.
- The National System for Monitoring Development Indicators, SI-

NASID, which despite a great deal of effort having been invested in its conception and development has unfortunately not yet succeeded in overcoming its teething troubles and in becoming a useful and effective monitoring tool.

- The Information System for Cooperation (SYSODA), a freely accessible system on the Internet which has acquired some importance in recent years. It contains data on the official development assistance to Nicaragua, in the form both of loans and grants.
- And, finally, the system based on the Performance Assessment Matrix (PAM) which is associated with the agreement with the Budget Support Group.

5. Donors, Assistance and PRSP

The context of foreign assistance to Nicaragua remains basically the same: a government which does not enjoy much popular support, which is in a position of antagonism towards the legislature and also, to a lesser extent, to the other Powers of State and which, for that reason, has become increasingly dependent on foreign aid agencies. These agencies have strongly supported the government, which has gained their trust, first for its fight against the corruption of the previous administration, later for its earnest cooperation with the IMF and its insistence on defending macroeconomic stability, and increasingly also for its efforts to draw up national development plans, however weak their processes of consultation. It must be noted that the government's commitment to poverty reduction is *not* one of the reasons why the donors trust it. Most of the donor representatives interviewed in August 2006 expressed serious doubts about that commitment (something to which these reports have called attention years ago), but that does not seem to have decreased their support for the government.

The Coordination of Aid

The development of the 'National Action Plan for Harmonization and Alignment' has been proceeding apace. The latest version has more targets and concrete indicators in each of the sections that form it: appropriation and leadership, harmonization, alignment and results-oriented management. Nicaragua has volunteered to be a pilot country in a DAC evaluation of progress in implementing the Paris Declaration. In April 2006 a DAC mission visited Nicaragua and concluded that the country is very far ahead in that implementation. In practice, however, progress is more limited. In relation to appropriation, for instance, the National Assembly has not approved this plan, so it is not clear what will happen to it after the new government takes over. It is also not clear whether all the line ministries agree with all the intentions and targets of the Plan.

As to the alignment with the government strategies and systems, some concrete progress has occurred, since the Law on Financial Administration (Law 550) determines that all foreign assistance will henceforward have to be included in the national budget. This also implies that the aid will appear in the SIGFA, which strongly enhances transparency. On the other hand, however, not all foreign aid uses government accounts. The IDB, for instance, cannot use government accounts and has to handle its

funds in separate accounts. Also, many donors still prefer to maintain their own project implementation units. Not all donors agree with the objective of decreasing the proportion of aid that is tied, or of increasing aid through common funds or budget support.

There has been some progress, at least on paper, in aspects such as the establishment of a period without foreign aid missions, setting up a Medium Term Expenditure Framework or donor harmonization. In practice, however, progress has been less, in part because donors seem to have difficulty in obeying rules the creation of which, in the name of the Paris Declaration, they themselves supported and encouraged. Most aid is still carried out through projects, and at the sectoral level the government gives signs of little leadership in the implementation of sectoral plans or in coordinating donor contributions towards that implementation. Consequently, progress in budget support takes place in parallel with project aid, while entailing its own transaction costs. Overall, transaction costs for the government do not seem to have decreased as a consequence of budget support.

Budget Support

The Budget Support Group (BSG) had some rather turbulent experiences in the first year of its existence. In the first annual meeting to review the Performance Assessment Matrix (PAM), which took place in May 2005, the donors were generally satisfied with the government's performance, but expressed worry about the delays in the approval of several laws which were part of the IMF programme of reforms, a delay which they felt could place future macroeconomic stability at risk. The Group then suspended payment of BS for 2005, which it made conditional on the production by the IMF of a "letter of conformity" which would confirm that there were no risks of macroeconomic instability in the short term and that only some structural reforms were needed to guarantee such stability in the medium term. In this way, the BSG in fact worked as an "IMF Support Group", with the effect of increasing the pressure over the National Assembly to approve the structural reform laws. It must also be pointed out that the IMF programme which the BSG supported in this way goes far beyond a programme aimed simply at ensuring macroeconomic stability. The Fund continues to impose very detailed conditions, interfering in the contents of the laws that must be approved, in what could be described as a form of micro-management. This is a main cause of the continual struggle between the Powers of State, with the Assembly almost always changing the proposed contents, which leads to new demands from the Fund on reforms to those laws and thus creating new conflicts. On the other hand the BSG has not yet used its political influence, at least in an effective way, to contribute to improved governance or to poverty reduction.

6. Government Accountability Towards the Citizens

According to the government, there has been significant progress in its accountability towards the citizens. Starting with the public discussion of the ERCERP, systems for planning and monitoring such as the SNIP and the SIGFA have been created and made accessible to the public, providing information on expenditures. Despite its limitations, the territorial participation in the discussion on the PND and the support given by the central government to the production of departmental development plans also contributed to some increase in transparency and to improved accountability towards the citizens.

The new role of the CONPES is one of the main arguments currently used by the government to argue that there have been substantial improvements in accountability. The enlarged representation of civil society in the CONPES, its openness to initiatives and suggestions coming from other organizations, even if those are not represented directly in the Council, and the deliberate policy of its Executive Secretary to strengthen cooperation with other state institutions have contributed significantly to improve the quality of participation, allow civil society organizations a more active role and have restored some of the CONPES' prestige. It should, however, not be forgotten that the CONPES is a consultative council of the President of the Republic, which means that its political role and influence depend above all on the President's will.

There are divergent perceptions among civil society actors about transparency and accountability at the national level. The dominant perception among those we interviewed is that transparency at the highest level of government has decreased, that there is a certain arrogance and greater accountability towards the donors than towards the citizens. On the other hand, interviewees consider that at other lower levels of the administration transparency has increased and accountability to the citizens has improved. The Law on Citizen Participation is generally considered as a very positive development, as is the government's work on monitoring in general, on the online version of the SNIP and SIGFA, and the monitoring it has been carrying out of the Millennium Development Goals. Civil society also considers that one of the main factors that has contributed to improve the situation of transparency and government accountability to the citizens is its own effort to monitor government policies and actions (such as the social audits to municipalities; the monitoring of the implementation of public policies; and the monitoring of the Budget and of the progress of laws in the national Assembly).

As to accountability of the government to the National Assembly, the relations between the two Powers of State were almost always marked by considerable antagonism, the main exceptions occurring when pressures, almost always from the outside, forced them to collaborate. There has, nevertheless, been undeniable progress, most recently when the Assembly recognized the SIGFA as the only official source for the monitoring of the national budget. Here also there seems to be some duality in the relationship, marked by antagonism and confrontation at the highest level, and by greater understanding and cooperation at lower levels of the hierarchy, or in relation to more technical and concrete questions.

It seems, for all these reasons, legitimate to conclude that there has been progress in clarifying and in making more systematic the information on public affairs. Things are, however, still far from being perfect, as attested by the recent evolution of the Corruption Perceptions Index, which indicates a worrying lack of impact upon the key problem of corruption.

Accountability at the Local Level

At the local level, municipalities do not share the central government's optimistic perceptions concerning the PND participation process. In spite of that, however, it is generally considered at the municipal level that there has been some improvement in accountability of the central to the local level, and that the PND consultation in the territories and the PASE system have contributed towards this improvement.

On the other hand, municipal governments are accountable to the citizens by means of local council meetings and the participatory spaces (Municipal Development Councils of MDCs) where local development strategies and projects are proposed, discussed and managed. The situation at the municipal level from the points of view of holding the municipalities accountable (citizens) and of accounting to the citizens (municipality) is very complex. The scarce resources transferred from the central to the local level and the technical shortcomings of the municipalities do not make it possible to develop an effective system for municipal governments to inform the citizens about their actions. Despite these limitations, there is in some municipalities better information about government actions, depending on both the political will of the mayor and the demands of the citizens.

In most municipalities, citizen participation within the MDCs is limited and not well organized, and in the worst cases MDCs are not working in some municipalities. In general terms, the local citizens often lack the culture and interest to hold local governments accountable and there are few initiatives aimed at strengthening local capacities to influence the strategies of municipal governments.

As to local perceptions concerning the transparency of management in municipal governments, the mayors' roles in government and political interests play an important role, and opinions are strongly polarized. Part of those interviewed at the municipal level believe that there is today greater transparency in local government management, but another group does not agree and argues that some mayors engage into corrupt actions for personal benefit or use funds for political purposes without informing the providers of those funds.

Reports of the 'Contraloría General de la República' indicate that in general there has been an increase in transparency at the municipal level. In relation to integrity there seems also to have been some improvement, but the problems of the centre often reproduce themselves in the periphery. The most advanced municipalities from the point of view

of accountability and peoples participation actually do it better than the central government, since the information is made available to the citizens quickly and in an easily understandable form; most municipalities are, however, very far from reaching this ideal situation. These opinions are shared by both municipal civil servants and by the members of civil society organizations that we interviewed.

In spite of efforts to improve accountability and to monitor public policies, there has been relatively little progress in these areas. The ERCERP had the positive effect that it made people more conscious of poverty-related expenditure, making it correspondingly more difficult for the government to cut such expenditure. On the other hand, the government has to some extent neutralized this effect by redefining poverty related expenditure to include expenditure in economic infrastructure, which increases its freedom to spend money in economic infrastructure and still call it poverty reduction expenditure. As mentioned earlier, poverty seems to have increased in Nicaragua, but perhaps it would have increased still further without all the efforts that have been made to increase transparency and to improve monitoring and downward accountability. These efforts represent significant institutional progress. If they are kept and used, the monitoring and accountability systems that have been developed will, after a learning period, play a useful role in helping the new government to spend its money better and to ensure that better results are forthcoming from that expenditure.

We could conclude by stating that there have been real and significant improvements in downward accountability; these improvements do not, however, seem to have had a significant impact upon poverty reduction, at least for the time being.

7. Final Comments: Poverty Postponed

During the past four years the government has placed remarkable energy, dedication and talent at the service of the reform and modernization of the Nicaraguan state. It has done many things well, including many that are related with the drafting of the PND and with designing the monitoring systems associated with that plan. Where it has definitely has not done well is in poverty reduction: despite the considerable volume of debt relief, of the 500 to 600 million dollars of ODA that it has received each year, supposedly for poverty reduction, and despite the safety valve of emigration, there are strong indications that poverty has increased in Nicaragua.

We should not, however, talk of failure, rather the opposite. The fact is that this conservative government has performed very successfully its role of creating conditions that favour the continuation and strengthening of the process of capital accumulation in Nicaragua, regardless of the consequences in terms of poverty. Everything has had greater priority than poverty reduction: economic growth, the reform of the state, internal debt, the country's financial situation. Furthermore, the government has used the PND and all its agreements with the donors to make as sure as possible that those conditions will continue to prevail even after it leaves power.

The donors have organized to provide for sectoral and general budget support in accordance with (more in form than in content) the Paris Declaration. They have, however, failed to think enough about whether the growth that they stimulated was sufficiently pro-poor. They gave debt relief and more than 600 million dollars per year in ODA, supposedly for poverty reduction, and poverty increased while the economy grew.

Perhaps the most important lesson of all this for the future is one that could have been drawn already years ago: that economic growth does not automatically lead to poverty reduction. Hopefully donors will finally start to think, with the new government, about what pro-poor growth is and what it is not, and about the practical implications of this for the aid that they will continue to give to Nicaragua, partly because they need such aid as much as the country itself does.

Halving poverty by 2015 is one of the greatest challenges of our time, requiring cooperation and sustainability. The partner countries are responsible for their own development. Sida provides resources and develops knowledge and expertise, making the world a richer place.



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