



COOKING UP COMMUNITY STRENGTH IN NICARAGUA

COUNTRY PROFILE



trōcaire



Figure 1: Magarita Martínez, Ana María Florián and María Cristina Casco serving lunch during the 'Olla Común' event in the Jocote community, Palacaguina, Madriz (Photo courtesy of Trócaire, Nicaragua)

In Nicaragua, like many countries in the Global South, the influx of processed and packaged convenience foods into rural communities has had a huge negative impact on nutrition. From packaged pastas to chocolate bars to mineral drinks, these products are associated with a modern, westernised life-style and have displaced traditional fruits and vegetables which formed the basis of the rural diet for millennia.

Trócaire and its partners in Nicaragua have been working with rural communities to recover the cultural, as well as nutritional, value of wild and traditional foods and recreate the communality of producing and sharing food. This is done by three principal means: 1) the promotion of organic family gardens which incorporate a diversity of fruits and vegetables including native corn, beans, fruits and vegetables, particularly yuca (cassava) and sweet potatoes; 2) the protection of genetic diversity and ensuring farmers have access to local and affordable seed year after year through seed banks and; 3) education with local communities focusing on

revaluing wild and traditional foods and learning new recipes for creating healthy, affordable meals with locally available produce.

Trócaire's partners have learned that to improve food security it is not enough to simply produce more food or more diverse food, but that these efforts must be accompanied by nutritional education, aimed at changing the culture around food consumption, with rural families and communities. This includes learning, training and advocacy processes to help change mentalities about the palatability and health benefits of small grains, leafy greens and other wild and traditional foods compared to the processed foods and monocultured food available in supermarkets and promoted by the media.

In recovering ancestral knowledge and culinary practices partners and communities are centring the importance of growing food and sharing meals as a community activity.

COUNTRY CONTEXT



Nicaragua is a Central American country with a population of six million people.



It is the poorest country in Latin America with an estimated 30% of the population living in poverty.



An estimated 17% to 30% of children are malnourished.



70% of the country's population is engaged in agriculture contributing 20% to the country's GDP but an estimated 40% of Nicaragua's farmers do not own their own land.



Nicaragua is the 20th most vulnerable country in the world to natural disasters, particularly drought and the increasing potency of hurricanes and tropical storms which are worsening due to the effects of climate change.

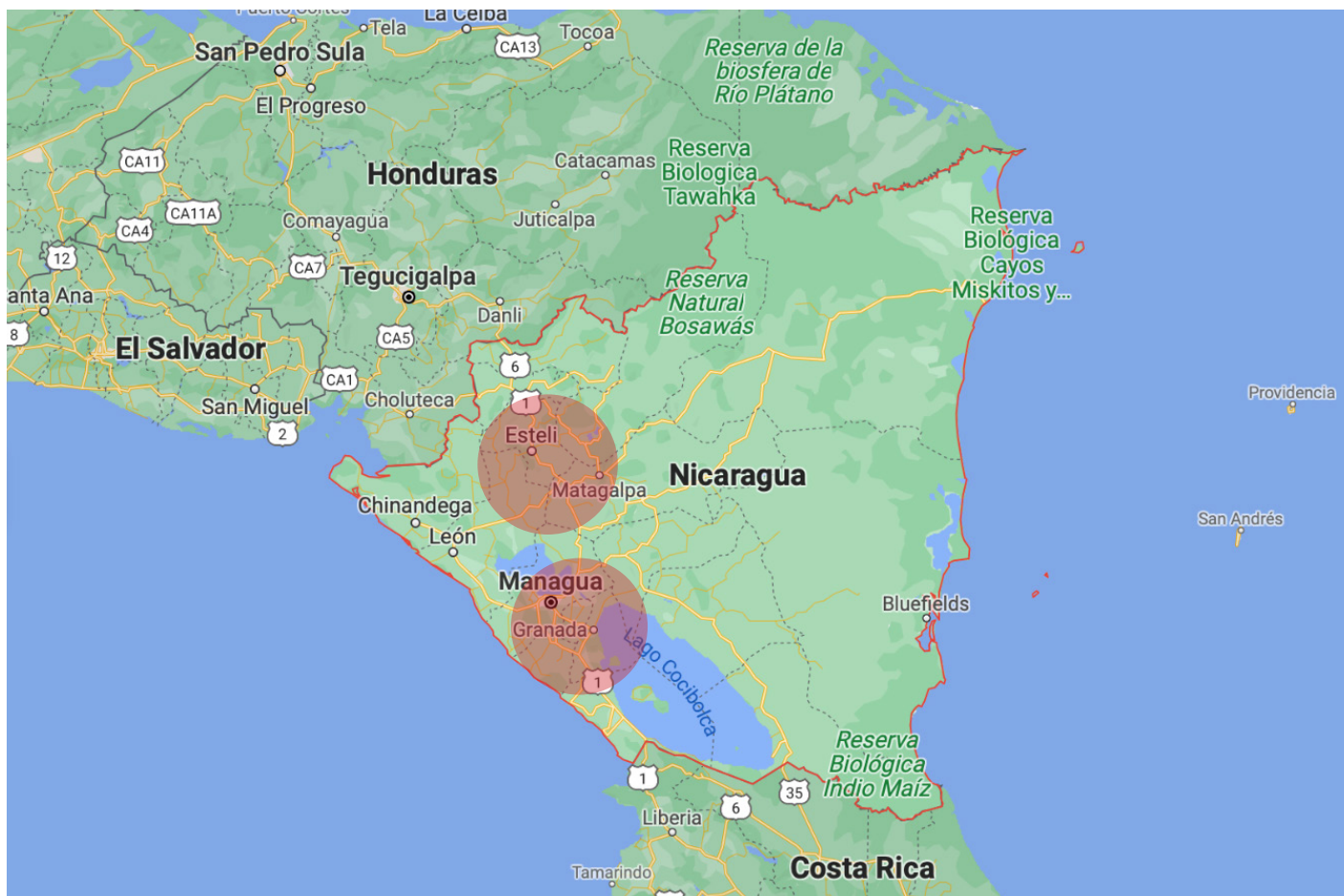


Figure 2: Map of Nicaragua showing Trócaire's areas of intervention. Source: googlemaps.com



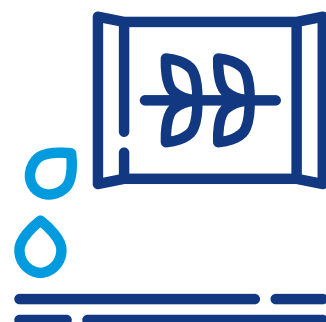
TRÓCAIRE PROJECTS IN NICARAGUA:

Trócaire works to ensure people living in poverty in rural areas in the West and North of Nicaragua benefit from the sustainable use and management of natural resources and can exercise their rights to access and control natural resources, to promote food security, improvement in diets and increased family income through the recovery of wild and traditional foods.

How does Trócaire and its Partners recover and protect wild and traditional foods?

Working with partners, such as OCTUPAN (Peasant Association Knowing Ourselves and Producing), ADDAC (Association for Agricultural Diversification and Development), GEPA (Group for the Promotion of Agroecological Agriculture) UGAQ (Union of Farmers and Agricultural Cooperatives Quilalí), COOPAMOV (Multisector Agricultural Cooperative Orfilia Vásquez) and MCN-SOMOTO (Communal Movement – Somoto), the efforts to recover wild and traditional foods in both production and consumption include:

1. Nutritional awareness-raising and education;
2. Developing local polycereal and protein food/drinks;
3. Food forests;
4. Seed banks;
5. Communal Kitchen events;
6. Advocacy.



1. NUTRITIONAL AWARENESS AND RE-AWAKENING

Trócaire's partner OCTUPAN, which works with 49 communities across two departments, is dedicated to nutritional exchange and rescuing wild and traditional foods particularly leafy greens (leaves from the *yuca* (cassava), sweet potato and squash plants) and to the consumption of tropical fruits. Their interactive cookery classes with parents, students and the wider community, use leafy greens such as yuca leaves to prepare nutritious meals for families and school children. Workshops are held according to the seasonal availability of food. At the beginning of winter the consumption of green leaves are prioritized (May-June), during first harvest. Education on the diverse ways to prepare and cook with maize is also prioritized (nutritious drinks such as *atolito*). During the summertime when the weather is much drier (February-March), education on natural fresh produce and tropical fruits is prioritized.

568 women from 36 communities have participated in workshops, talks, and practical demonstrations on the topic of healthy production and consumption, using the traditional and ancestral recipes.



Figure 3: Margarita Martínez, cleaning yuca leaves in preparation for making vegetable patties at the El Jocote community, Palacaguina, Madriz, Nicaragua (Photo courtesy of Trócaire, Nicaragua)



Figure 4: Magarita Martinez, serving the vegetable patties made from Yuca leaves in the Jocote community, Palacaguina, Madriz (Photo courtesy of Trócaire, Nicaragua)



WILD FOOD FOCUS

Yuca (casava - *Manihot esculenta*) is a tuber grown across Central America and the root is one of the staples in the Nicaraguan diet. The leaf is also edible when cooked and provides a cheap and readily available source of vitamin C, vitamin B, beta carotene, iron, and zinc. OCTUPAN has been focusing specifically on encouraging families and communities to incorporate yuca leaves into their diet through the development of easy recipes such as patties and soups which can be made from ingredients that are cheap and accessible in rural communities such as maize and wheat.



2. LOCAL POLYCEREAL AND PROTEIN FOOD/DRINKS

Warm drinks made from maize (*atoles*) are a regular feature of the Central American diet and MCN-Somoto has developed a fortified *atole* – polycereal – made from toasted maize, cacao, barley, oats, soy and *jícara* (gourd) seeds, all of which are cheap and available locally. These are prepared at schools by volunteers and served to children during their break times.



Figure 5&6: Mayella Castellón making polycereal in the community of Mancico, Somoto, Madriz (Photo courtesy of Trócaire, Nicaragua)

3. FOOD FORESTS

OCTUPAN has also promoted crop diversification in family gardens encouraging the cultivation of coffee, cocoa, plantain, and other types of bananas alongside other edible plants and fruits. Diets have improved and families are able to earn income from selling their surpluses of both coffee and cocoa.



Figure 7: María Cristina Casco, weeding her onion and carrot bank in the community of Jocote, municipality of Palacaguina, Madriz, Nicaragua. (Photo courtesy of Trócaire, Nicaragua)

4. SEED BANKS

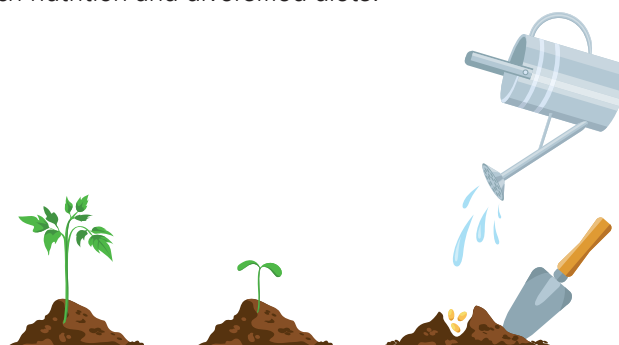
OCTUPAN has also promoted the creation of native seed banks owned and run by the community, and a community revolving fund, which reduces their dependency on seed sellers.

5. COMMUNAL KITCHENS

OCTUPAN has begun to hold an annual event known as the '*Olla Común*', (communal pot) where families from across a community will get together once a year to prepare a communal meal. The participating communities choose a traditional dish which has fallen out of regular consumption and, using locally available ingredients, they prepare this dish together. It is both a cookery lesson and a way to bring the community together in the act of preparing food.

6. ADVOCACY

GPAE works in coordination with government agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG), the Nicaraguan Institute of Technology for Agriculture and Livestock Ranching (INTA), MEFCCA, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry in drafting agroecological policies, including the recovery of wild and traditional foods and training educational promoters on subjects such as nutrition and diversified diets.



IMPACTS



Agroecology: 76% of female and male headed households participating in the programme – almost 2,000 families – have adopted **agroecological approaches**, including the cultivation of wild and traditional foods in family gardens.



Diversified production: 841 male heads of homes and 1,978 women heads of homes, who in previous years received vegetative planting material to diversify their plots and farms, are already harvesting fruits (oranges, lemons, nances: *Byrsonima crassifolia*), plantain, yuca, and different types of bananas. Families have introduced more vegetables and tropical fruits into their backyards and plots such as mango, nance, passionfruit, and sweet granadilla.



Family Gardens: Families using the bio-intensive method of backyard production have been able to produce enough vegetables in small spaces to more than compensate what they might be able to produce from just corn and beans in the same plot.



Diversified diets: 23% of families participating in the programme are now eating foods from ten food groups; 31% eat foods from nine food groups; and 24% eat foods from eight food groups.



Seed Banks: Five partner organisations have supported a total of 33 native seed banks, focusing on increasing the repositories of beans, corn and sorghum seeds. The banks have a maximum storage capacity of 528 quintals (1 quintal is the equivalent of 100kg). An estimated **565 families** participate directly in these banks which give each family the capacity to borrow up to half a sack of seed depending on their needs.



Child Nutrition: In eight out of the 17 communities served by OCTUPAN, eight children's cafeterias have been supported to provide healthy school snacks to an estimated 250 children under eight years of age. This project has been used to develop talks with parents and teachers about the importance of using low-cost local products, but with high nutritional value, for healthy and wholesome food for children.



Local Consumption: OCTUPAN and MCN are making efforts to ensure the food grown in family gardens and plots is consumed and prepared locally, prioritising improving family diets over sale of produce to markets.



COVID-19: The uptake of a more diverse diet, including the incorporation of wild and traditional foods, during the pandemic has led to generally improved health, well-being and diets. This had a positive effect on family incomes, as healthier families spend less money on medicines and are better able to work and study. The constraints on movement showed that community resilience helps resist shocks caused by external factors, with communities better able to depend on their own food sources rather than relying on imports.

PARTNER WEBSITES:

ADDAC: <https://www.facebook.com/addacong/>

MCN Somoto: <https://www.facebook.com/movimientocomunalnicaraguense.somoto>

OCTUPAN: <https://www.facebook.com/octupannicaragua>

UGAQ: <https://cooperativaugaq.org>

FURTHER RESOURCES

Trócaire 2021, Fixing the Food System Farmer First

English <https://www.trocaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Fixing-the-Food-System.pdf?type=policy>.

Spanish <https://www.trocaire.org/documents/como-establecer-un-sistema-alimentario-dando-prioridad-a-los-agricultores/>

