

The Right to Play in Nicaragua



Harry Shier of CESESMA in Nicaragua reports on the start of an exciting new project – and how Playwords readers can get involved....

Let me introduce myself. I am an ex-playworker, playwork trainer and more recently, right to play activist. I came to the UK from my native Ireland in 1973, and lived and worked there for over 25 years. Then came the millennium – a time for change – and I upped and

moved to Nicaragua in Central America. I have made my permanent home there, and work with children and young workers on the region's coffee plantations, helping them participate and organise to promote and defend their rights, including, naturally, the right to play.

Children's lives in Nicaragua's coffee zone

Some of the world's finest coffee is grown in the remote mountains of northern Nicaragua. Although it is a fertile and productive region, Nicaragua's tortured history, weak infrastructure and vulnerability to natural disasters conspire against the people's efforts to escape from poverty. Extreme poverty and dependence on coffee production lead to a high incidence of child labour. The Nicaraguan coffee industry employs many thousands of child workers who work long hours in difficult and dangerous conditions, receiving little or no payment for their efforts. Almost all drop out of school early, while some have no opportunity to go to school at all. Most of these children are aware that they have rights on paper, but are not aware of any mechanisms available to them to demand or defend their rights. Their parents'



Picking coffee on "La Isla" plantation.



School playground games: *Las cebollitas* (the little onions)

expectation that they will work from a young age to help support the family leaves them few alternatives. The globalised coffee market has little respect for the rights, much less the dreams, of child coffee workers, condemning them to poverty, dependency and little hope of change.

Children's play in Nicaragua

And yet ... in Nicaragua children can be seen playing everywhere. Most children have to manage the conflicting demands of work, school and play from a young age, but the impulse to play is felt as urgently here as anywhere in the world, so children make the most of any space and any spare minute for their play. Rural children play in the fields, forests, lakes and rivers that surround them, while city children play in streets and back yards. Those that attend school take advantage of all being together in one place to self-organise playground games. In the northern mountains, the coffee harvest keeps adults and children alike hard at work picking coffee for three months of the year, but even here children make games out of this tedious work.

There is little room for indoor play in the small wooden shacks that are home to most rural Nicaraguans, but with warm weather 365 days a year the outdoors beckon all year round. There is no adult-organised play provision in Nicaragua. Most towns have some unsupervised rusting swings in a park, but there are no playworkers, play centers or out-of-school clubs.

Observing children at play in Nicaragua I am struck by the irony of the situation. In rural Nicaragua, despite the poverty and lack of any kind of organised provision, I see an environment and conditions for children's play that come closer to my ideal than

anything I can find in sophisticated twenty-first century Britain. Nicaraguan children have freedom to play and access to play opportunities that are denied to children in more technologically advanced societies. They play freely in lakes and rivers. They play amongst farm animals, which wander freely around the rural communities. They ride horses. They play baseball, basketball, hopscotch, marbles and skipping games. They climb trees to pick the lushest fruits on the highest branches. They make and fly home-made kites (on their own initiative – no adult-run kite-making workshop required).

Of course they don't have access to personal computers, games consoles or video arcades. Nor do they have access to adventure playgrounds, after-school clubs or holiday playschemes. Somehow none of these things seem necessary here. I have observed children in Nicaragua engaging in all sorts of play activities – unsupervised – that would be considered too risky to contemplate in a northern supervised-play situation: diving head-first into river-pools, sailing dug-out canoes on tropical lagoons, hanging Tarzan swings over rivers, lighting fires, shooting at birds with catapults, riding horses without helmets – or even saddles.

Key to the accessibility of these play opportunities is the fact that children move about freely throughout their communities. Their access to the outdoors is not restricted and set about with fears and anxieties as in the UK. Linked to this is a culture of self-reliance. In Nicaragua it is taken for granted that children gradually learn to recognise, assess and manage risk through play. Climbing a tree is a good example: you check each branch before you put your weight on it, and the more trees you climb, the better you get at doing this. If you fall, there is no point in looking for



Improved play equipment: Boys playing in the road with old bicycle tyres in La Corona.

someone to sue for compensation, so best learn to climb safely.

Defending the Right to Play

I may have painted a rosy picture of children's play in Nicaragua, but there is, of course another side to the story. There are also tough barriers that deny the right to play to many Nicaraguan children. The first is the need for children to work. With most children in the area working on the coffee plantations from the age of six or seven, and also trying to find time to go to school, play-time is limited or non-existent. Most children attend school, at least for a few years. This is usually mornings-only, leaving the afternoons free for work, on a coffee plantation, a family small-holding, in the home, or all three. Being in the tropics, night falls at around six o'clock all year round, and you don't want to be playing out after dark, and there's no room to play at home either.

The other big obstacle is adult attitudes. Very few parents recognise play as important for their children's development. None recognise it as a right. Parents generally hold that children should be working or studying, and that playing is just time-wasting and causing trouble.

Finally, to paint a true picture of children's play in Nicaragua, the issue of gender can't be ignored. In general boys have more free time and fewer restrictions than girls. This is because of a culture that assigns traditional gender roles to boys and girls (we call it "machismo"). Girls are expected to work in the house while their brothers go out to play, and girls are considered more vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse when they stray too far from home. So defending the right to play in Nicaragua must start with a gender equality focus.

Promoting and defending the child's right to play is a battle barely begun in Nicaragua. When we talk with children about the rights that they feel are important to them, the right to play and recreation always appears high on the list. But it doesn't interest the adults who make the decisions, either in local government or the voluntary sector. Health, education, food, prevention of violence, sexual abuse and HIV are all high priorities for the development programmes and aid agencies that operate here. But no one has yet so much as mentioned the right to play as a priority for Nicaragua's children, and I believe it is time that they did.

If you agree with me, please read on...

CESESMA

The organisation I work for, CESESMA (Centre for Education in Health and Environment) is an independent, non-government organisation founded in 1992 as an environmental education action group, and incorporated as a not-for-profit voluntary organisation in 1998. Apart from myself, all CESESMA's management and staff are Nicaraguans, and most are local people.

Our mission statement is "To promote and defend the rights of children and young people, through processes of awareness-raising, reflection and action in partnership with rural children and young people, and other members of the community". We have also adopted a statement of shared vision which is of: "Children and young people with greater self-esteem; with opportunities for an integrated education; taking control of their own development; capable of organising themselves to defend their rights and contribute to finding solutions for the social, environmental and cultural problems affecting their communities".

The central idea here is that children are not passive consumers or, worse, cheap labour, but can become



Poverty or paradise? Children's play on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast.

ALL PHOTOS: CESESMA

active agents of transformation in their families, schools and communities. Three key factors enable them to do this. The first is their expert knowledge. They are the ones who really know about their lives, their working conditions, their families, the problems to be faced in their communities day by day, their hopes and fears. This expert knowledge can be recognised, respected and built on. The second factor is their awareness of themselves as rights-holders, and the third is their developing capacity to participate and organise collectively in defense of their rights. CESESMA's role is to enable, facilitate, and support the learning processes that make this possible.

For more information on CESESMA's work, see **W:** www.cesesma.org

The CESESMA/Playwords Right to Play Campaign

The right to play is high on the children's agenda, but up to now there has been no one to support them in defending this right. Having talked to several groups of local children about this we know that they are interested in working with us on this issue. We and they believe the time is right for Nicaragua's first ever "Child's Right to Play" campaign, and with the support of Playwords readers, we can make it happen.

The main campaign activities will be:

1. Take the project idea to selected communities in the coffee-growing zone where CESESMA already has educational programmes and community links in place. Identify parents, teachers, and community leaders willing to back the project and support children working on it.
2. Form local action groups with children from these communities to work on the project.
3. Organise community meetings where the children's research teams present their findings to parents, teachers, coffee farmers, community leaders and officials to promote the right to play, challenge anti-play attitudes, and build wider support for their campaign.
4. When the children feel ready, and provided we can raise enough funds, we hope to take the campaign national. CESESMA is already active in the Nicaraguan National Coordinating Council of NGOs Working with Children, and also the National Network of Young Communicators, so the networks and alliances are already in place to make this happen.

This campaign will be a first for Nicaragua. Its great strength will be the lead role of the children themselves in campaigning for their right to play. It will also be a landmark initiative in building international solidarity around the child's right to play.

How you can support the Nicaraguan Children's Right to Play Campaign

Common Threads is kick starting the Nicaraguan Children's Right to Play Campaign with a donation of £500. Many readers will already know that, as part of our mission as a social enterprise, we make donations to various projects outside the UK which are supporting children's play at this time of year in the form of 'Good Gifts'. This year we have decided to make just one donation to CESEMA to enable them to set up this very important campaign. We hope that Playwords readers will be able to join us in re-directing their pennies from sending Christmas cards and giving them to support this campaign instead!

CESESMA has already set up a "Friends of CESESMA" UK Charity, so it is easy to make donations. As this is managed with voluntary support, they have zero administration costs in the UK so they can guarantee that every penny donated goes to CESESMA in Nicaragua, and on top of that they can claim Gift Aid tax relief on your donations.

Once the project is underway, the children will send regular reports and photos to Playwords, so readers can be kept up-to-date with progress and see how their donations are being put to use. There will also be a Right to Play Campaign web page on CESESMA's website.

How to make a donation

Cheques payable to Friends of CESESMA can be sent to:

Friends of CESESMA
Cleaver Black
Suite 5 Ormeau House
91-97 Ormeau Road
Belfast
BT7 1SH

Alternatively, if you have internet banking you can pay direct to their account:

Bank: Ulster Bank
Sort Code: 93-86-55
Account name: Friends of CESESMA
Account number: 10175784

Please fill in a Gift Aid declaration and send it with your donation so that they can claim tax relief. You can download this from:

www.cesesma.org/amigos_eng.htm

Please think about making a regular payment by standing order. You can use a single Gift Aid form to cover all donations until further notice.

Friends of CESESMA is a charity registered in Northern Ireland, No. XT8739.