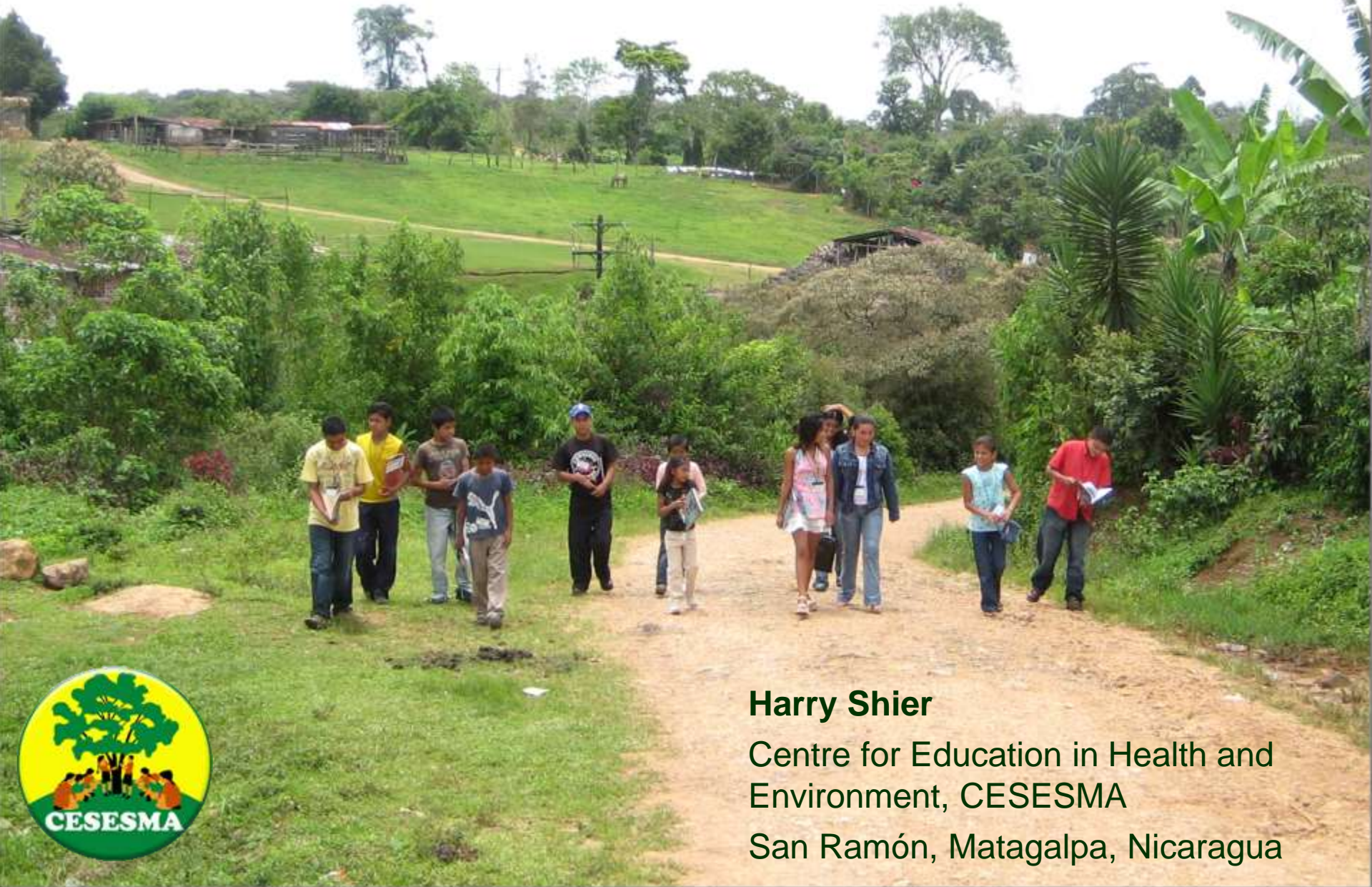


# Can Nicaragua's child coffee workers help us fan the flames of the Spirit of Adventure Play?



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Thirty years ago I worked on Adventure Playgrounds in South London.



Now I work with child workers on Nicaragua's coffee plantations ...





... among other things helping them organise a campaign to defend their right to play.





**Hypothesis:** Despite their extreme poverty, exploitation and deprivation (and lack of public investment), Nicaragua's remote rural communities provide an environment that facilitates healthy development through child-centred free play miles better than the play environments typically on offer in the wealthy, well-resourced United Kingdom.





How is this possible?





## Differences:



1. Year-round warm weather increases opportunities for playing out.





## 2. Few motor vehicles





3. Few strangers – so they are easily identified (thus removing the two main parental fears that interfere with children's right to play in the UK).





4. Small rural communities surrounded by lots of untamed “nature” – increasingly rare in the UK these days.





5. There are hardly any fences or boundaries, so from their earliest days children play amongst farm animals, which graze freely throughout the communities. They also ride horses, which serve primarily as a means of transport rather than for sport and recreation as in the UK.





6. They also play freely in the many rivers and lakes. They hang Tarzan swings over rivers. They dive off waterfalls into rocky pools.





Those who live on the coast sail dug-out canoes on lagoons and fish for crabs and shrimps in mangrove swamps. They don't drown.







7. Fire is familiar; present and useful in every home. For British kids, fire is unfamiliar: attractive yet dangerous.



8. Little or no access to entertainment technology: No home computers, video arcades, DVDs, i-pods, playstations, internet or cinemas. Television is starting to appear in some homes but is still not common; local radio remains the main communication medium. Technological or “passive” recreation is not an option





9. Small communities of people who know each other, where adults look out for children's wellbeing in general. In the UK most people live in large communities where they don't know their neighbours well. Adults tend to only look out for their own children and not get involved with other people's children





10. In Nicaragua, local authorities and other service providers cannot be held responsible for mishaps that occur to children. That is, when something goes wrong there's no point seeking compensation from anyone. The UK, on the other hand, has become a "compensation culture" in which Local Authorities and other service providers can be sued for compensation if any mishap occurs to a child. It is clear that this places constraints on play opportunities available to children.





11. Finally, in rural Nicaragua, children's immune systems develop naturally as they combat the various bacteria that abound in the natural environment. In the UK, on the other hand, there is growing scientific evidence that a too-antiseptic environment is weakening immune systems and so making children more susceptible to allergies and germs (so they need greater "protection" – that is to say wrapping in cotton wool).





Of course life is not all play:



Children work on coffee plantations

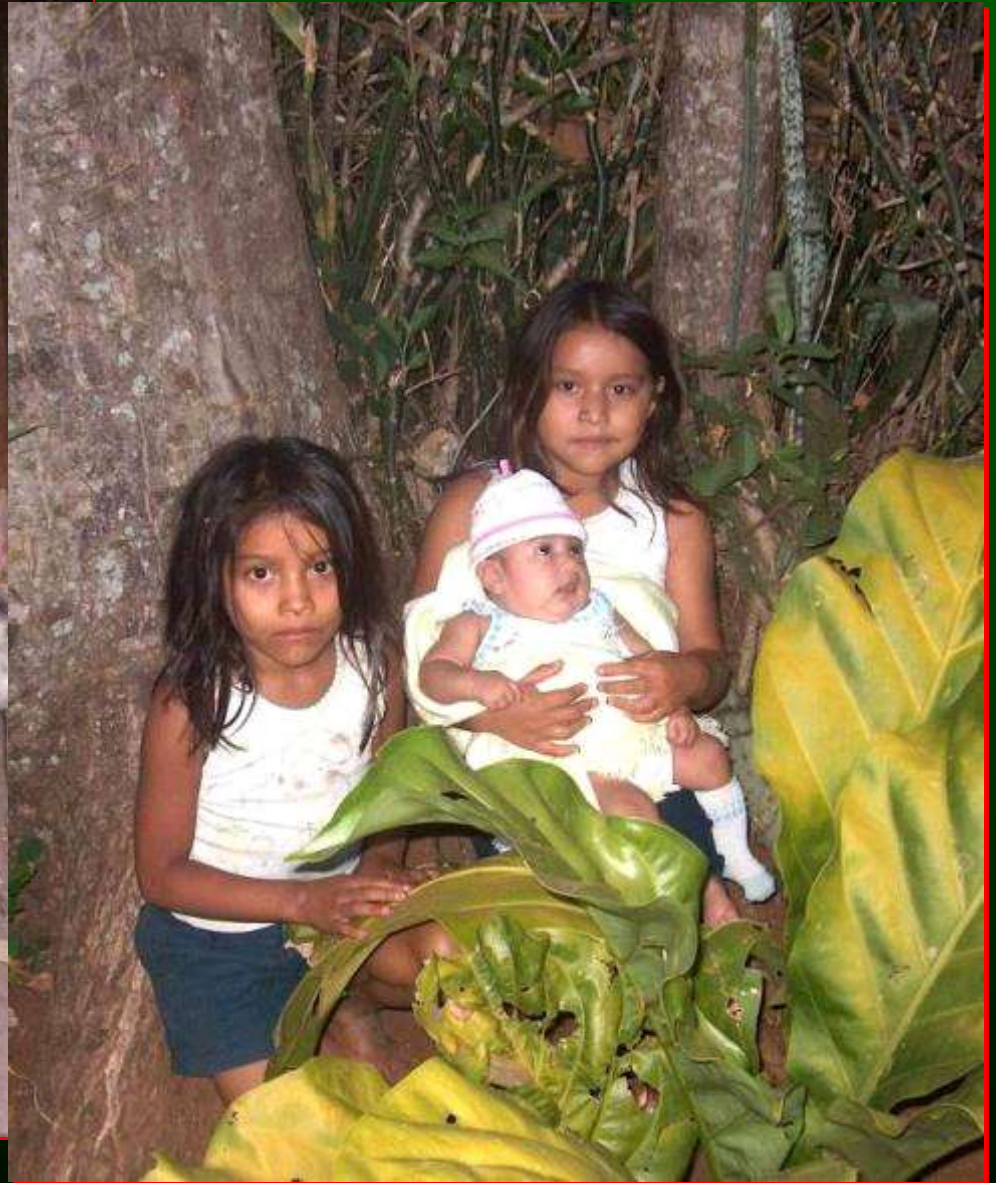


Children also help their parents on the land.





Girls do housework and look after younger brothers and sisters.





Water has to be carried from a well or pump, or sometimes a river. This is generally children's work, as is fetching firewood from the forest.





They also go to school. Most rural communities have primary schools.







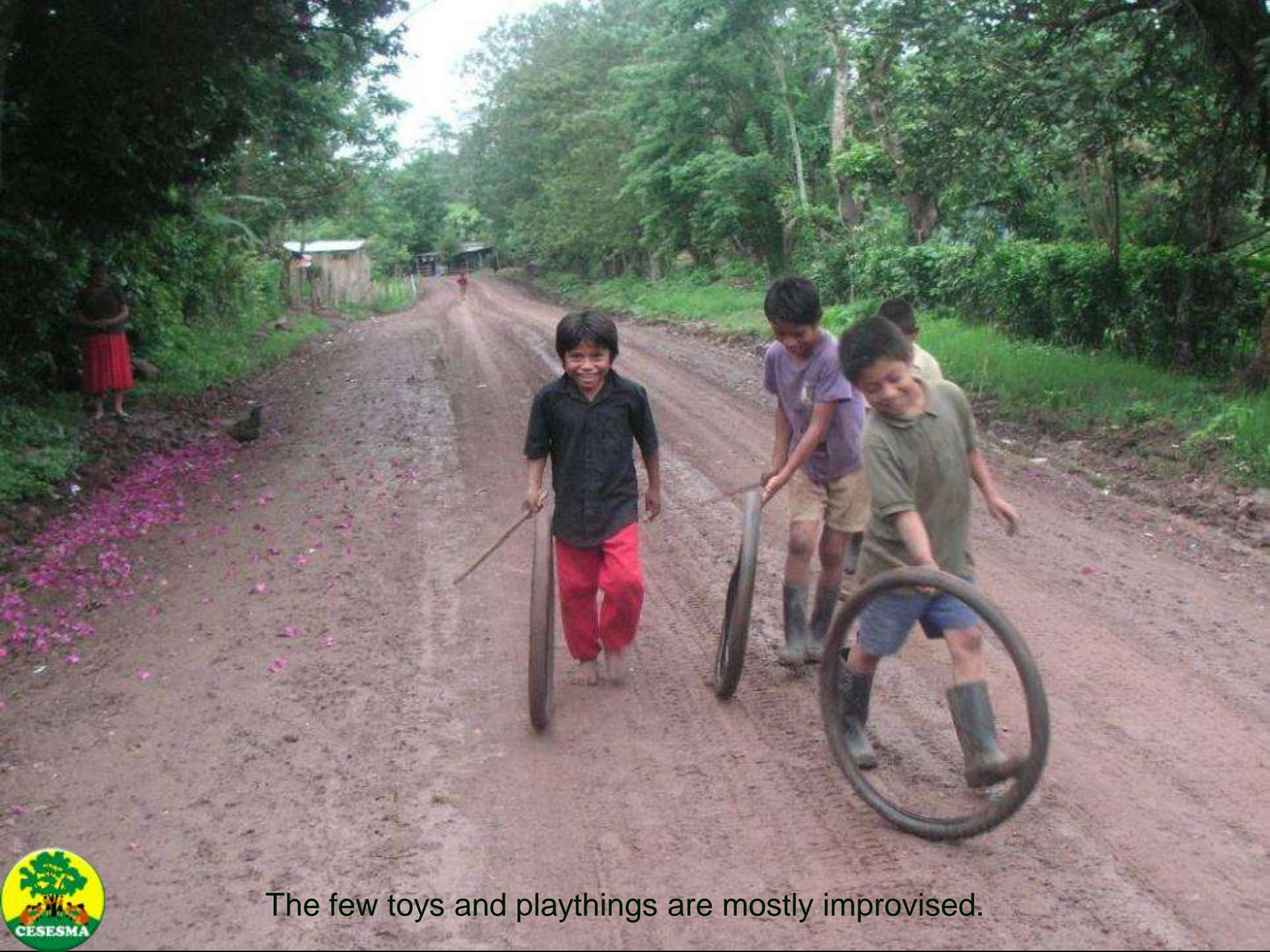
But there are no secondary schools in rural communities.



There is nothing remotely resembling “play provision” as we know it in the UK.  
No adult concerned with or involved in providing for play.







The few toys and playthings are mostly improvised.







Though there are also a few traditional items like marbles, spinning tops and catapults.







Although the natural environment is inviting; as well as monkeys, and beautiful tropical birds and butterflies, it also contains poisonous snakes, scorpions, mosquitoes, wasps etc., which have to be avoided, or at least respected.





Despite all this, children can be seen playing anywhere and everywhere at any opportunity.





They don't get allergies. ADHD is unknown.



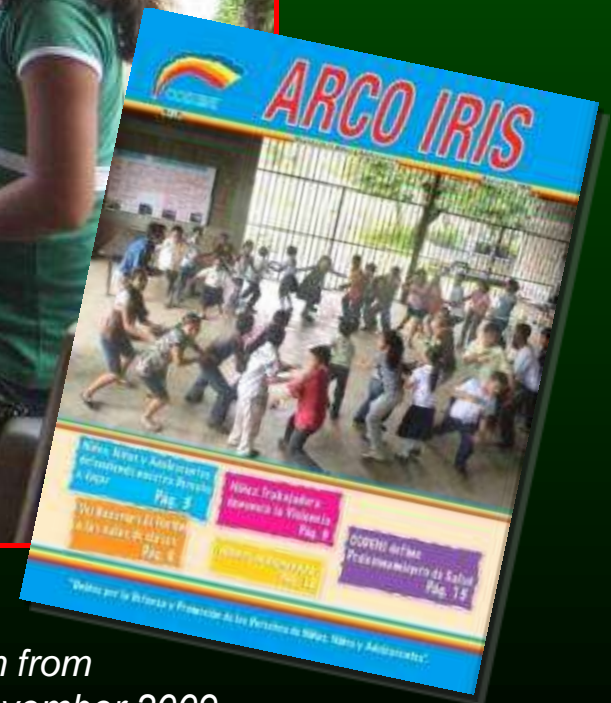


They suffer very few accidents. In fact they don't seem to meet with any of the potential disasters that pose such a threat when children go out to play in the UK.





Nicaraguan child workers have researched their right to play\* and identified what they need to defend this right:



\* Article by child workers' action-research team from Samulalí published in "Arco Iris" magazine, November 2009



According to their own analysis:

- ✘ They don't need playworkers or "play facilities".





They do need:

- ☑ A change in parental attitudes: understanding that play is important.





- ☑ Less exploitative working hours, so they can combine work, school and play.



*Young researchers present their findings and recommendations on the right to play to the Municipal Children and Youth Committee in Matagalpa, October 2009*



- ☑ Equal rights and freedoms for girls.





## Conclusion (ending with more questions rather than answers)

Can we learn anything from observing children at play in Nicaragua that might help us promote the child's right to play in the UK?

We can't change the weather.

But what can we change?

- ☐ Change in thinking about child protection?
- ☐ Change in conceptions of shared social responsibility?
- ☐ Change in understandings of play and its purpose?
- ☐ Change in the nature of communities?
- ☐ Change in the outdoor environment?
- ☐ Change in the role of the playworker?







**¡Muchas gracias!**