

IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS BY CANADIAN NGOS IN NICARAGUA

Mary Anne Connell, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

There is a shortage of schools in Nicaragua. Because of this, volunteer organizations build schools there. In recent years the necessity of education has emerged as an important requirement in the prevention of poverty. A basic education enabling people to read, write and do simple arithmetic is a powerful tool in equipping people to care for themselves and their families. It enables them to get a job, do some entrepreneurial work, figure out the simple things in life, and make better use of indigenous knowledge. The first requirement of education is the desire to attend school, and the second requirement is the presence of a primary school in the community.

First, an analysis of the objectives, methods and processes of three Canadian NGOS working in school construction projects in Nicaragua was done.

Research questions focused around two questions. **Do Canadian NGOs with a strong participative approach have a greater impact than others?** The answer is yes to operating participation, and no to construction participation. All three NGOs use the same method for constructing schools, that is, a Canadian team provides money and volunteers to build the schools. One NGO provides an experienced foreman and a few experienced volunteers and encourages local participation. The other two NGOs hire an experienced local foreman who recruits experienced volunteers to supervise the work with Canadians assisting. The school with the least participation in the building process is the most successful on all counts. It has the best building, the largest property, the most students and teachers, the most financial help, the most active local leaders and

NGO staff, and the most active participation of families. There are also fewer classrooms in the community, so there is more demand to use the school. This same school has the greatest community participation in the day-to-day operations of the school.

Do Canadian NGOs that have a strong local partner have a stronger impact than others? The answer is yes. The success of the school community depends on the amount of time and effort put into the project by local leaders, the presence or absence of the leaders living in the community, the geographic location of the community in relation to other influences, such as tourists and ability to earn an income, as well as the number of schools present in the larger community.

Secondly, the *positive and negative impacts* of school construction projects by Canadian NGOs on families and the local community in Nicaragua were identified and analyzed.

The **positive impacts** are:

1. Dozens and dozens of students are now getting a basic education
2. They have increased opportunities and hope for the future
3. The families and communities have taken initiative to pursue other projects
4. Relationships have been established between communities in Nicaragua and Canada
5. Individuals have great pride in their communities.

The **negative impacts** on the families and communities are:

- (a) Government has become dependent on NGOs to provide schools
- (b) Community is dependent on NGO to pay for operating expenses of school
- (c) Canadians and Nicaraguans had to learn new methods of construction
- (d) **Indirect Impact** – school expenses cause financial hardship for families

Thirdly, the *positive and negative impacts* of school construction projects by Canadian NGOs on Canadian volunteers were identified and analyzed.

The **impacts** on Canadians are:

1. **Positive:** A heightened awareness of the benefits of aid, both for the recipients and the donors
2. Greater understanding of poverty
3. More appreciation of democracy and wealth.
4. **Negative:** Did not feel appreciated by the local leaders and NGO staff

Fourthly, the causes of the *positive and negative impacts* of school construction projects on families and the local community in Nicaragua with a particular focus on participation were examined and explained.

There are a number of positive impacts. The first is the presence of a **physical building** in the community constructed by Canadians and Nicaraguans working together resulting in a multipurpose building that is used for a school, church, meetings, and recreation. The building and grounds are kept neat and tidy, with no garbage, a sharp contrast to the grounds in the local communities. At the time of construction several people received gifts from Canadian volunteers such as school supplies, clothes, household items, and sports equipment, all donated by Canadians because NGOs informed the volunteers of needs in the communities.

The second impact is **economic**. There was an input of money into the economy from the purchase of building materials, although not into the local communities, because the rural communities are too small to have building supply outlets. Some local trades people were paid a minimal amount for their work. Money continues to go into the

economy on a monthly basis, because there is at least one paid teacher living and working in each community.

The third impact is related to **skills**. Some Nicaraguans learned construction skills from Canadians, especially women, when they volunteered to help. This is particularly valuable to women because many heads of households are single mothers or grandmothers and traditionally are not allowed to learn or help with construction. Some Nicaraguans taught construction methods to the Canadians, reinforcing their own knowledge and creating skills in teaching others. It also created the skill of communicating with people from another culture who neither speak the language nor are familiar with indigenous methods. All of this was necessary because in two of the projects the Canadians were there to assist the local people.

The fourth impact is the academic **education** that children are getting in school and adults are getting indirectly from children, or directly by attending school, many for the first time. Other education revolves around social skills learned from music, dancing, games, and practicing good manners. A benefit to the whole family is health education that children and adults are learning through hygiene practices, and good nutrition at one school, all of which leads to increased self-awareness and self-esteem.

The impact of **relationships** is creating social cohesion in the communities because people now know each other better, and function better socially. They have formed relationships with NGO staff and local leaders who provide added knowledge and

contact with outsiders, as well as with Canadian volunteers, all originating from the construction projects.

People are learning new **responsibilities**. Families are providing their children with supplies for school, and fathers are taking responsibility for earning money to purchase the items. Schools need to be managed, and local leaders and community members are taking responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the schools. Canadian NGOs are keenly interested in the success of the schools they have built, and are responsible for regular contact with the communities. In the case of Casa Canadiense, the new staff person is learning the responsibilities of the job. Local people are learning that they can take responsibility for their own futures through education and planning.

The negative impacts are fewer than the positive impacts. Indigenous **construction methods** are different from Canadian methods, so all workers had to learn some new skills. Canadians had to learn how to make reinforcement bars, a tedious manual process of wiring metal bars together to be used to reinforce the corners of the building. Canadians preferred to fill the spaces in the cement blocks with paper, rejecting the local custom of using earth. Nicaraguans learned that Canadians like to complete buildings as quickly as possible, in contrast to the local unhurried custom of doing things slowly. All of this was complicated by the fact that people could not speak each other's language, and translation took time or was not available.

The Government has become **dependent** on NGOs to provide schools in expanding communities, thus relieving them of the responsibility of doing something they should be doing. The Government is alleged to be corrupt, as reported every day on television during my three months in Nicaragua, and the main corrupter is former president Aleman who is alleged to have taken millions of dollars for his own use, money that could have been used to build schools. The schools are dependent on the sponsoring NGOs to pay for salaries and supplies because private schools owned by the churches do not receive funding from the Government, and community schools owned by the communities receive funding from the Government for salaries, but not for supplies.

Relationships not maintained with the NGO, Casa Canadiense, caused a negative impact in one community by leaving a feeling of abandonment. The people expressed a desire to be in regular contact with Casa, and also want and need financial support. The cause of this is twofold. First, the staff person is new and just learning about the community and responsibilities. Secondly, Casa acts as a facilitator, not a sponsor, so is not obligated to support the school, but the community does not understand this.

An indirect impact is that the schools cause **financial hardship** for the families because the people have little or no money, even if they are employed. There is not a high priority for school attendance because some people do not view education as a way of improving the quality of life. In the worsening economy and downward spiral of poverty, people are spending their money on immediate needs such as food, rather than on a long- term investment in education.

Table 1. Summary of Positive and Negative Impacts and Causes

IMPACTS	CAUSES
<i>Positive</i>	
Physical: School in each community Gifts –People received school supplies, clothes, household items, sports equipment	Building built together by Cdns and Nics. Canadian NGO staff informed volunteers of needs in communities Volunteers took items donated by Cdns.
Economic - Materials purchased Employment for trades people Employment for teachers	Purchases put money into economy, Local people paid min. amount for work Teachers are paid salary
Skills – Nicaraguans learned construction skills, especially women. Nics. taught Cdns construction skills	Women volunteered to help, learned construction skills. Cdns. helped Nics. and needed to learn indigenous methods
Education – Academic – children and adults learning to read and write Social – children & adults learning music, games, politeness and socializing skills Health – learning hygiene and nutrition All leads to self-esteem and self-awareness	Children attending school for first time Adults attending school for first time, or learning from children Children socializing in formal setting for first time Adults socializing formally or informally
Relationships – Local people with each other. Local people with local leaders. Local people and leaders with NGO staff Nicaraguans with Canadians	Community focused around construction project for several weeks NGO staff & leaders active in community Can. and Nic. volunteers worked together
Responsibility – Families taking resp. for providing children with school accessories Parents and leaders responsible for school NGOs resp. for contact with schools Individuals taking resp. for own future with hopes & plans for further education and income	Children need supplies for schools Schools have to be managed by people NGOs interested in success of schools People want to get out of downward spiral of poverty & worsening economy & some people view education as way out
<i>Negative</i>	
Construction Methods Different – Volunteers had to learn new methods	Difficult to learn new methods because Canadians and Nicaraguans could not speak each others language
Dependency – Government dependent on NGOs to build schools Schools depend on NGOs for salaries/supp	Government has inadequate resources, and other priorities. NGO schools receive partial or no funding from Government
Relationships not maintained Casa NGO staff not in regular contact with local community and volunteers Community wants support of Casa	Casa acts as a facilitator, not as a sponsor Staff person new, learning responsibilities Casa does not keep good records of volunteers names and addresses
<i>Indirect Impacts</i>	
Financial hardship Students need clothes, shoes, backpacks Families have little or no money Education not a priority	No employment or low pay for work Some people do not view education as way of alleviating poverty People spend money on immediate needs i.e. food, versus long term education

Lastly, recommendations for action by Canadian NGOs and local communities and families with respect to mitigating negative impacts and reinforcing positive impacts of school construction projects were made and given to the Canadian NGOs.

Recommendations:

1. Recommend that all three NGOs include the term ‘**development**’ in their objectives. Basically it is now being done through school construction projects, working in co-operation with an organized church or the local community. An example of development is meeting human needs in poor countries, and stimulating awareness and support for international development among the Canadian public.
2. Recommend that a summary of school construction costs be communicated to the volunteers who raised the money, and donated their time and energy to build the school.
3. Recommend that NGOs communicate on a regular basis with volunteers via newsletters and emails in order to keep volunteers informed of how their project is being operated and monitored. Building relationships and follow-up with the local people leading to long-term involvement, rather than just building the school and leaving is important.
4. Recommend that schools and NGO staff encourage all families to make education a priority for all members of the family, including finding ways to pay for the education
5. Recommend that schools have a School Site Council made up of parents and teachers and that the Committee be responsible for the day to day operation of the school.

6. Recommend that NGOs find effective ways to facilitate mutual transfer of knowledge between donors and recipients. This is as important as financial help and building of infrastructure. Being open minded to the needs of local people, and working with, not doing for the local community is advantageous.
7. Recommend that an interpreter be present at construction sites.

Concluding Comments

School construction projects by Canadian NGOs are benefiting families and communities through several positive impacts and few negative impacts. The research also examined if people were able to initiate and implement other similar projects in the community, and are involved in the operation and monitoring of the school, which is an ongoing process, year after year, so social development will always be occurring and changing within families and communities.

Participatory development in the three case studies involved international and local participation. The Canadian NGOs exist for the purpose of raising the awareness of Canadians about the lost and hurting in the world through helping people in a developing country. The NGOs respond to a request from a community in Nicaragua by asking for Canadian volunteers and money, send a team to work in co-operation with volunteers, leaders and NGO staff in a community there, and together a school is constructed. Mutual empowerment takes place through a transfer of knowledge in construction skills, language communication, and cultural similarities and differences. Even though it is more costly to send Canadian volunteers to help build the schools than it would be to

send the money so that the Nicaraguans could build the schools on their own, a valuable exchange of experience and newly created relationships would be lost. Without Canadian participation, it is highly probable that this money would not be available for school construction. The Nicaraguans know that Canadians care about them when they travel to their country and help build a school. Canadians know that their help is needed when they observe the conditions in the community.

The disadvantages of NGO constructed schools are that they are not eligible for full Government funding. Private schools receive no funding, and community schools receive partial funding. This results in the communities having to rely on the NGOs for support, and to eventually find other methods of funding. While this impact is not a direct result of the construction projects, but an indirect result of the functioning of the schools, it could have serious impacts in the future, such as requiring families to pay large fees, relying on continued funding from NGOs, raising funds themselves, convincing local or national Government to fund schools built by NGOs, or the schools being closed.

(The author, Mary Anne Connell, can be contacted at connellm@on.aibn.com)