

RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE  
COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF SAN RAMÓN,  
NICARAGUA

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*“Beatius est magis dare quam accipere”.- Hch 20:35*

## Table of Contents

<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>List of Images</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>I. Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
1.1. Research Problem.....	9
1.2. Research Questions .....	10
1.3 Objectives of the Research.....	10
1.4. Significance of the Research.....	11
1.5. Scope and Limitations of the Research .....	11
<b>II. Literature Review</b> .....	<b>13</b>
2.1. Rural Development .....	13
2.2. Participatory Decision Making .....	14
2.3. Community Capacity .....	16
2.4. Community based Tourism.....	18
2.5. Sustainable Tourism.....	19
<b>III. Methodology</b> .....	<b>21</b>
3.1. Choosing San Ramón .....	21
3.2. Qualitative Research .....	22
3.3. Case Study.....	23
3.4. Goals of Social Research.....	23
3.5. Research Schedule .....	26
<b>IV. Rural Development in Nicaragua and Matagalpa</b> .....	<b>31</b>
4.1. Current Development Situation in Nicaragua.....	32
4.2. National Human Development Plan (PNDH).....	33
4.3. Overview of the Department of Matagalpa.....	36
4.4. Matagalpa's approach to Rural Development .....	38
<b>V. San Ramón's plan for Development</b> .....	<b>40</b>
5.1. San Ramón Municipality Overview.....	40
5.1.1. Telecommunications .....	43
5.1.2. Potable water.....	43
5.1.3. Education.....	44
5.1.4. Health Services.....	45
5.1.5. Housing.....	46
5.1.6. Economic Activities .....	47
5.1.7. Tourism.....	47
<b>VI. El Roblar- Cooperative El Privilegio</b> .....	<b>49</b>
6.1. Land Rights 1960 .....	49
6.2. Sandinista Revolution 1980-1989 .....	52
6.3. Agrarian Reform 1990.....	55
6.4. Beginning of Cooperative Movement in El Roblar 1991.....	56
6.5. Agrarian Cooperatives Union in San Ramon 1992 .....	58
6.6. The creation of GEMAS 2000.....	60



6.7. Creation of “El Privilegio” 2001 .....	62
6.8. Property title delivery in El Roblar <i>January 2008</i> .....	63
6.9. Stem Rust affectation <i>April 2008</i> .....	65
6.10. International Cooperation in El Roblar 2010.....	67
6.11. Crops Diversification law 2012.....	68
6.12. Legal ratification of Cooperatives 2014.....	70
6.13. Marketing of coffee “El Privilegio” 2015.....	72
<b>VII. La Garita- Guesthouses.....</b>	<b>75</b>
7.1. 1979-1989 Sandinista Revolution .....	75
7.2. Scholarships and relationship between Cuba and Nicaragua 1989-1993.....	80
7.3. Reconstruction process 1991-1995 .....	84
7.4. La Garita: Centralized government branch office 2000-2002 .....	89
7.5. ADETOURS and the Guesthouse programs 2002-2008 .....	91
7.6. Historic-tourism in San Ramón and cultural implications 2009-2010 .....	95
7.7. Guesthouses recognition: INTUR and NGOs 2012-2014.....	99
<b>VIII. Los Andes- Finca La Hermandad .....</b>	<b>102</b>
8.1. Agrarian Reform and the <i>anticooperative movement</i> 1990 .....	102
8.2. The birth of Finca La Hermandad 1993-1994.....	105
8.3. Development of a multi-grade school 1995.....	108
8.4. Creation of Cooperative La Hermandad 1996-1999.....	110
8.5. Infrastructural Improvements and ecological transformations 2000-2005 .....	112
8.6. Beginning of the Agro-ecotourism project and UTZ certification 2008-2009 .....	115
8.7. Bio-digester construction and Field School 2010-2013 .....	118
8.8. Eco-lodge and opening of the rural and eco-touristic project in the Finca 2014-2015....	120
<b>IX. Evolution of San Ramón’s development stakeholders evolution: 1990-2015...</b>	<b>122</b>
9.1. Initial stakeholders: post-revolution period 1990.....	122
9.2. Millennium-period stakeholders: 2000.....	124
9.3. Current stakeholders: 2015 .....	126
9.4. Community networks and their evolution.....	127
<b>X. Sustainable Community-based Tourism for Rural Development in San Ramón.....</b>	<b>129</b>
10.1. Relationship between studied cases and sustainable development .....	130
10.2. Decision-making from a rural perspective.....	134
10.3. Self-created rural initiatives: promoting rural empowerment.....	138
10.4. Increasing community capacity through cooperatives .....	141
10.5. Transition from PNDH to San Ramón’s model .....	147
<b>XI. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>152</b>
11.1. Summary of the Research .....	153
11.2. Implications from the Research.....	155
11.2.1. Implications for governmental policies .....	155
11.2.2. Human Resources Implications.....	157
11.3. Recommendations for further Research .....	159
11.4. Recommendations for further Development.....	160
<b>References.....</b>	<b>162</b>

## List of Tables

<u>Table 1: Detailed Schedule of Field Research.....</u>	<u>29-31</u>
<u>Table 2: Reasons for tourism in San Ramón.....</u>	<u>49</u>

## List of Figures

<u>Figure 1: Annual GDP growth in Nicaragua .....</u>	<u>34</u>
<u>Figure 2: Map of Matagalpa .....</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>Figure 3: San Ramón's geographical division.....</u>	<u>41</u>
<u>Figure 4: Map of San Ramón.....</u>	<u>43</u>
<u>Figure 5: Stakeholders in 1990 .....</u>	<u>123</u>
<u>Figure 6: Stakeholders in 2000.....</u>	<u>125</u>
<u>Figure 7: Stakeholders in 2015.....</u>	<u>126</u>
<u>Figure 8: Networks around communities.....</u>	<u>128</u>
<u>Figure 9: Banyai/Chaskin's community capacity attributes.....</u>	<u>142</u>
<u>Figure 10: PNDH model.....</u>	<u>149</u>
<u>Figure 11: San Ramón's model.....</u>	<u>150</u>

## List of Images

<u>Image 1: Overview of the city of Matagalpa.....</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>Image 2: WIFI network in San Ramón.....</u>	<u>42</u>
<u>Image 3: Kindergarten in San Ramón.....</u>	<u>45</u>
<u>Image 4: Housing in San Ramón.....</u>	<u>47</u>
<u>Image 5: Entrance to El Roblar.....</u>	<u>50</u>
<u>Image 6: Mayra Gámez.....</u>	<u>54</u>
<u>Image 7: Cooperative Sign.....</u>	<u>63</u>
<u>Image 8: Roasting Machine.....</u>	<u>73</u>
<u>Image 9: La Casa del Niño.....</u>	<u>80</u>
<u>Image 10: Ivania Zeledón.....</u>	<u>83</u>
<u>Image 11: Catholic Church of San Ramón .....</u>	<u>91</u>
<u>Image 12: Improved Guest room.....</u>	<u>102</u>
<u>Image 13: Entrance to forest.....</u>	<u>108</u>
<u>Image 14: Organic Compost .....</u>	<u>115</u>
<u>Image 15: Bio-digester.....</u>	<u>120</u>

## Abstract

In the northern side of Nicaragua, the small municipality of San Ramón was marked by its history of war and strategic geographical position during the revolution in the 1980s. This however was not what the population of San Ramon wanted to be known for. Fighting against globalization and global warming, they decided to take matter into their own hands. With the government succumbing to pressure and instituting a new law that presented tourism as the tool to fight poverty, they implemented a series of different community-based initiatives that would help them reach their goal of development.

This research outlines and discusses the different process of creation and implementation of an all-women-integrated coffee cooperative, a family-owned agro-eco-touristic farm and a guesthouse network. These three initiatives proved to the country the strength that San Ramón had. Being the first recognized community to implement activities using only local resources and highlighting the story of the community, San Ramón presented a new model: “Rural Development Initiatives for sustainable Community based Tourism”.

In terms of methodology, this is a qualitative study, based in unguided interviews and personal descriptions of the author and community. Using literature that describes the terms introduced provides a unique perspective of the different meanings that terms such as rural development and community capacity development can have according to the stakeholders.

The study shows the different limitations a researcher can experience while focusing on a rural community. Ultimately it aims to the further creation and analysis of different approaches to development, based and led by rural communities. It opens the door for further study on Nicaragua’s concept for development and the *proactiveness* of rural communities in the country.

## **I. Introduction**

When the United Nations created the Millennium Development Goals, 2015 seemed to be far away. Countries involved as main areas of work implemented such goals into their own governmental actions at a very slow rate, trying not to interfere with their own goals, set during electoral campaigns and responding to the countries inside known problems. Eradicating poverty and ensuring environmental sustainability were among the hardest goals to achieve and by 2014, with one more year to go; the world knew they were not going to be accomplished. (United Nations, 2015)

In the northern side of Nicaragua, the small municipality of San Ramón was marked by its history of war and strategic geographical position during the revolution in the 1980s. This however was not what the population of San Ramon wanted to be known for. This research outlines and discusses the different process of creation and implementation of an all-women-integrated coffee cooperative, a family-owned agro-eco-touristic farm and a guesthouse network. These three initiatives proved to the country the strength that San Ramón had. Being the first community to implement activities using only local resources and highlighting the story of the community, San Ramón presented a new approach, using community-based tourism to achieve rural development.

Using literature that describes the terms introduced provides a unique perspective of the different meanings that terms such as sustainable development and community capacity development can have according to the stakeholders. The study shows the different limitations a researcher can have while focusing on a rural community. However, the best tool that he or she can have in matters of data collection or familiarization with the topic is fieldwork research. This study thus presents a different perspective on the development process of Nicaragua using these three cases as the main data source. The implications of such a community-based development initiative are discussed. In terms of methodology, it is created using unguided interviews and personal descriptions by the author.

### 1.1. Research Problem

Nicaragua with its troublesome history still touts its positive-minded population. Foreigners say that it seems incredible how even people that live in extreme poverty can smile at them and even though their financial resources could appear to make it difficult, they still love to welcome tourists and offer gifts such as fruits or artistic demonstrations. These people, population of rural communities, are the ones that have build the country and are leading it towards development.

Although the media highlights only the work of the government as a general institution and NGOs as primary facilitators of big initiatives, rural communities are behind the small collective work that makes everything successful. San Ramón is a clear example of this case, the municipality is the only one featured in national media. Introduced as collective activities supported by the government and implemented with the help of government officers, rural communities' initiatives are still fighting their way towards recognition.

Even if the community's main goal is not to be recognized but to reach sustainable development, their job and their own initiatives should not be overlooked. The need for a participatory development initiative goes beyond doubt. The country needs an alternative to the current implementation methods it holds now and this study is expected to serve a primary guide to that change, introducing three different cases from San Ramón. Moreover, the country needs the development of a study that explains community-empowered initiatives.

Despite the news reports and small recognitions by the international community, San Ramón should be a matter of further academic observation to create a full spectrum and introduce as many cases as possible since some of them had to be obviated due to narrative purposes. Nicaragua requires inclusive and decentralized development initiatives, promoted by the rural communities, in which they work as the main actors and sustainability is sought, in order to keep the country alive.

## 1.2. Research Questions

This study aims to address the basic question how San Ramón's initiatives were created and what are their key elements that can be linked with rural development. This is facilitated by four sub-questions:

1. What is Rural Development in Nicaragua and how is it perceived?
2. What are the sustainable development initiatives models that San Ramón introduces?
3. How did San Ramón introduce community-based tourism to its development initiatives?
4. How were these initiatives achieved and what were they key elements?

## 1.3 Objectives of the Research

The objectives of this research are linearly related to the above questions. The main objective is to introduce San Ramón's activities and its development plan, to contrast the possibilities that Community-based tourism for rural development and its sustainability. They have an exclusively social character, following the goals of social research stated in Chapter 3 of the study, methodology.

1. To introduce an alternative approach to rural development, in which the community is the key actor of both implementation and evaluation process.
2. To describe main aspects and characteristics of San Ramón's development initiatives.
3. To explore the relationship between community-based tourism and rural development initiatives and they can be interconnected, using the example of three rural communities in San Ramón.
4. To provide an interpretation of San Ramon's sustainable community-based tourism and rural development initiatives from a researcher's perspective.

#### 1.4. Significance of the Research

The significance of this research lies on two considerable premises:

1. Specific study from an insider's point of view: it has been written based on the free statements of the involved actors as well as personal remarks from the author as both a researcher and a national of the country.
2. Descriptive and chronological narrative supported by global concepts (i.e.: community-based tourism, rural development, community development, etc.) to explore the Nicaraguan perception of these terms.

Due to its narrow global presentation and its status as a Central American third world nation, Nicaragua receives limited attention from academic researchers. This creates a constraint for policy implementation and academic studies. Introducing the point of view of the ones in charge of the initiatives in this case (the municipality) opens the door to information from a primary source. At the same time, the point of view of a Nicaraguan researcher (in training) provides an extended perspective to the study.

The chronological arrangement and categorization of the chapters allows the reader to focus on one aspect at a time. On a similar basis, the diversity between each of the three cases presented in chapters 6,7 and 8 respectively creates a picture of all the different aspects of the municipality in the matter of development.

Furthermore the presentation of the cases with a supported basis from academically introduced concepts provides credibility and creates a relation between the empiric knowledge of a rural community and scientific knowledge of experts in the subject.

#### 1.5. Scope and Limitations of the Research

As mentioned in the above significance of the research, constraints are a part of this study. Both time and geographical constraints are already established due not only to the 15 hours difference between the author's temporary residence and the subject of study. This among the bellowed mentioned limitations turn this research into a mainly

descriptive study rather than a theory building one. There are four main limitations that need to be mentioned and explained to understand the scope of the study:

1. No previous similar study has been made before: Performing a research that serves as continuity for a previously presented one provides the author with necessary information to start his exploration. In this case, not only San Ramón but also the topic of development initiatives in rural communities of Nicaragua, is relatively new, meaning there were no previous studies found (to my knowledge); which makes it hard to summarize all the information those interested in the topic need to know in order to understand the context of the events.
2. Time constraints during the field study: Since the field study was performed during one of the university's semester breaks and even though the interviewees showed unrestrained willingness to be included in the research, the short period of one and a half months is not enough to create a complete spectrum; therefore some details could not be included, there was no sufficient data to make them a case study. This creates the need for a further study on the topic.
3. Cultural restrictions: Rural communities in Nicaragua hold a patriarchal culture. Women, although empowered and with their own development and business initiatives, feel too shy to be outspoken about their problems and needs. Details such as the hardest part of the implementation process or the goals they have for their business could be narrowed. This research is just one part of the spectrum, to create a fully detailed research with the opinion of an entire rural community in Nicaragua the researcher needs to create a stronger bond with the community and the key actors.
4. Language barrier: Although not presented completely in this study, the difference between the English language used for an academic paper as this one and the colloquial Spanish used in Nicaragua is very broad. Terms that define and characterize descriptions and feelings of the community can't be translated and in this process the lost of cultural elements can happen. However, the author has exhausted all possible methods to avoid a complete lost in the so-important cultural aspects of the research.



## **II. Literature Review**

For academic purposes and understanding ground, I am using five main concepts to study the cases. These concepts are defined and studied by known scholars, whose works lead me through the journey of social research. Although the scope of the study and the interpretation of the data here presented do not limit itself to these concepts, there is a need to define them and avoid misunderstandings to the reader.

At the same time, the introduction of these aspects, which I learned during the past two years of study, have helped understand the needs the country has for development, as well as the different approaches that can be taken. Development on its own is a very broad aspect and so are the other five that I will introduce below. This chapter will define them, in order to be later addressed with an interpretation based on the cases presented in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of this study.

### **2.1. Rural Development**

Rural development is possibly one of the wider concepts in the field of development. Not only because of the uniqueness of each rural community in each country, but also because of the endless possibilities this presents. Although it hosts an integer development, in which all areas are improving and evolving together, it can focus on one single factor and that as its own is already considered development.

For the study of this concept I will be focusing on the description provided by Malcolm Moseley in his book “Rural Development: principles and practices.” Moseley is a specialist in rural development and has written over 10 books in which he explains the aspects of rural development and how it evolves in each country. One of his biggest focus is the importance of accessibility to reach rural development as well as spatial planning for sustainable infrastructure improvement in rural areas.

When it comes to rural development Moseley defines it as “the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas.” (Moseley, 2003) Rural communities, although not necessarily defined by their geographic location, do depend on the population and the surroundings of them. They tend to be isolated, areas where access and transportation can be an obstacle and where population lives scattered.

The key in Moseley’s definition is the relationship between quality of life and economic well-being. Development is often seen as economic improvement of a sector, but rural development refers in this concept, and should in every other, to the overall improvement of the society. Rural development is, by any means, the overall improvement and wellbeing of a community in a relatively isolated area, where individuals live scattered and networks are the main communicational resource

In this book Moseley also mentions “ (rural development) it is also characterized by its emphasis on locally produced development strategies.” (Moseley, 2003) This particularity is what makes San Ramón one of the best examples for rural development in Nicaragua. The use of local strategies and the focus in local resources makes out of San Ramón a special case.

Supported by Moseley’s experience and his texts, which are referred in textbooks of Nicaraguan universities, we can understand the overview of rural development as the overall improvement focusing on local strategies and using local resources. An improvement that works as a domino effect in other areas of the community, meaning that it is integer and sustainable.

## 2.2. Participatory Decision Making

As Moseley highlights in his book, one of the keys for rural development is the inclusion of all the stakeholders of the community. This means that participation of all actors is a must for a sustainable development. This type of participation is built in the process of

decision making, which brings me to another key concept for this study, participatory decision making.

Although the term by itself is not a single one but a constructed idea, some scholars do support its existence as part of a country's tools for development. One of them is Sam Kaner, who explains in his book: "A facilitator's guide for participatory decision making." The idea publishing his draft as a guide and not calling it a book is to introduce the importance of putting the community in the spotlight. A facilitator, Kaner says, is what every program officer should be; communities have and should be granted with enough information to make their own decisions and we should merely act as facilitators, not implementors. (Kaner, 2014)

At the very beginning of his guide, Kaner defines this as a "...creative process to give ownership of decisions to the whole group, finding effective options that everyone can live with." The key here is the word ownership. Throughout his book, he emphasizes in the repercussions this ownership will have in the group or community. By making their own decisions they can accept the outcome without feeling pushed over by a third party.

Kaner explains that at first, this can seem as a bad decision if the group has no experience in the subject, but he explains that this is why it is also important to provide them with the alternative of having consultation from a facilitator that can be represented by any entity. One of the main problems in rural communities of Nicaragua is the imposition of initiatives in rural communities, where the decision-making team is not familiar with the situation.

By using participatory decision-making, Kaner mentions, we cannot only have a more sustainable solution but a feasible as well. At the same time, this solution or this initiative will be agreed upon by the collective community and not only one person, meaning that it will have the support of the entire group for it to be successful and its chances of generating a change increase.

### 2.3. Community Capacity

When a community is able to promote participatory decision-making and carries the process successfully, they generate outcomes that have repercussions in other aspects of their life as a community. All of these aspects are gathered in a single one, community capacity, which determines a community's ability to generate changes and create alternatives to answer to their problems without damaging others or themselves.

Community capacity, in this context, will be used by advocating to the term suggested by Cindy Banyai, who, besides being a Ritsumeikan APU graduate, focused her PhD. dissertation and several other papers published by different journals and periodicals in aspects of community capacity. Banyai constructs the definition of community capacity as “the ability of a community to produce outcomes through its actors by utilizing the resources at its disposal.”

The components of community capacity can present themselves differently in every community. The main idea is that this capacity is based on the outcomes the community can produce when the stakeholders of a project or initiative are the society that lives there and instead of using resources that are granted from a different actor or subtracted from a different community, they use their own. It is important to mention here that the fact that a community should use its own resources to increase community capacity doesn't mean they can't share them with other communities. Networks are another element of community capacity; the difference lays on the main resource for the project and the idea behind it.

In that same paper, Banyai describes the attributes of community capacity, introducing them with a very similar approach as Robert Chaskin in his book “Defining Community Capacity: A Framework and Implications from a comprehensive Community Initiative.” In this book, Chaskin explains that this concept has four main attributes that complement each other and at the same depend from one another indirectly (Chaskin, 1990).

1. Sense of Community
2. Level of Commitment of the Community
3. Mechanisms for problem solving
4. Access to Resources.

These attributes, Chaskin explains don't limit to the concept characterized by their name, meaning, for example, that the access to resources doesn't limit itself to being able to acquire such resources but identifying them and analyzing their use in a sustainable manner.

In his book Chaskin emphasizes that in order for a community to reach a level of community capacity that will allow it to become independent, it must aspire to sustainability in its entire means. At the same time he mentions that, because rural communities don't have the same level of education as most of the urban communities, the methods they can and will use to address these attributes don't have to be formal.

In this aspect, Chaskin briefly mentions the creation of cooperatives and support groups inside of the community. In cases where communities don't have the support of the government and they are imposed with methods for development that require their cultural and social values to change and risk their environment, disaster is meant to happen. The goal of the existence of a concept and characteristics such as the ones in community capacity is to allow the community to express itself freely and determine their own future.

Just as the methods to increase their community capacity and evolve in the decision-making process will vary depending on the community, these forms of expression will also result in different outcomes. Whether the community aspires to infrastructural changes, with the firm believe that that is what they need to become sustainable and increase their opportunities, or tourism related initiatives; the idea is to provide them with the opportunity to take the lead and be the change agents of their own community. (Chaskin, 1990)

## 2.4. Community based Tourism

Being a relatively new term, community-based tourism (CBT) has already made its way into development initiatives and this study portrays the way CBT has been incorporated in San Ramón for a sustainable development. At first sight, there might not seem to be a relation between rural development and CBT but just as one depends on the other, they can complement each other at the same time.

For the definition of this term, M.E. Kelly constructed the most adequate concept in a paper for the community tourism newsletter. Kelly doesn't define CBT, instead of that it focuses on the fact that "community based tourism shifts the focus away from the tourist and their experience to the host community and THEIR experience." (Kelly, 2002). Defining CBT, as itself is somewhat repetitive, since the name of the concept explains what it is about.

The remarks we need to take into account when studying this term and working with it is what its main purpose is. Most tourism offers have as their goal to increase the income of those implementing the programs. In the case of CBT the goal is to introduce the community as the attractive resource of the program. Instead of promoting a place or an activity that can or cannot be seasonal, CBT promotes the people, their story and their experience in short programs that involve the tourist with the community.

Involving the tourist with the community means more than just sharing experience and personal history, it also includes the participation in the daily life of the community. Kelly explains that every community has something that makes it different from the others; there are no two communities that are the same. That small characteristic that can be identified in small assemblies or with evaluation process is what the community needs to highlight.

Another aspect that this scholar points out is the importance that networks have for a successful CBT. The use of inside networks to support each other will ultimately determine how successful the initiatives will be. If a community is seen as weak or worse than that, dangerous, tourists won't come back and although no investment was made, this will affect the people's self esteem.

It is important to remember that, just like any other type of tourism, CBT does have risks and one of them is the possibility that it will take more than one attempt to find a unique feature. The use of local resources and the promotion of human and cultural resources can and will decrease the possibilities of failures but the secret behind CBT is persistence and willingness.

## 2.5. Sustainable Tourism

The reason behind the creation and need for CBT is the lack of sustainable alternatives in the tourism aspect. Since most of the tourism initiatives imply big investments and are created by foreigners, they are hard to manage in a rural community. These types of initiatives are non-sustainable, which addresses the point of the need for sustainable tourism alternatives in rural areas.

To examine this concept I will use Beech and Chadwick's concept, introduced in their book "The business of Tourism Management". Chadwick is a known scholar for his research on community capacity and Beech is a specialist in tourism and tourism alternatives. In this book they introduce the importance of sustainable tourism for humanity, instead of merely financial reasons.

They define tourism as Sustainable tourism a type of "Tourism that is economically, socio-culturally and environmentally sustainable. With sustainable tourism, sociocultural and environmental impacts are neither permanent nor irreversible" (Chadwick & Beech, 2006). In this concept, all categories are overseen, economy, socio-cultural aspect and environment.

One of the main points of sustainable tourism is the environmental damage that it can cause to the environment, especially in rural areas. San Ramón's main concern when it comes to new initiatives is the potential risk this could imply for its environment. Sustainable tourism works with the local components and finds alternatives that include a way of sustaining these components.

At the same time, the socio-cultural factor of sustainable tourism, as defined by Beech and Chaskin, means the involvement of the human resource for its own empowerment. (Chadwick & Beech, 2006) This means that the alternatives that are going to be introduced in this type of tourism should provide an outcome that provides more than financial benefits to the people. Whether it's introduced in human resource training or volunteer work, the socio-cultural factor must be addressed.

Finally and just as any other type of tourism initiative, although it should not be the main goal of tourism, the scholars say, sustainable tourism should also imply the increase of financial resources of the community and families. (Chadwick & Beech, 2006). Since it ultimately is tourism, management and improvements are to be done in the area, and the training as well as the preparation for facilities and hosting guests involves costs that the community/developer should pay from the income it is generating. At the same time revenue is to be earned for personal purposes.

It is important to mention here, and because of the emphasis the book makes on this point, that the revenue earned in sustainable tourism should not be used to overlook any of the other factors. This means that the person in charge of the tourism initiative should not use the revenue in any way that harms the environment and should consider the importance of socio-cultural growth for the sustainability of tourism in the area. (Chadwick & Beech, 2006)



### **III. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Choosing San Ramón**

During the initial phase of this study my focus of research changed constantly. Started trying to focus on citizen's participation for the creation of developmental policies in a different community, located nearby the capital city. With the advise of my research supervisor I came to realize that studying citizen's participation was a broad spectrum and there was no depth of such study.

After a series of events and months of research about ongoing development initiatives in Nicaragua, I ended up meeting San Ramón. At first, the information I had about the community-based tourism initiatives and the rural communities in the municipality came from a single person that worked in the municipal office as the director of the tourism division. This was not the biggest problem, however, but the fact that before my research trip I was still not clear of the possibilities I had to find everything they told me I could find in matters of community initiatives.

Finally during my research in the months of August and September I discovered that not only San Ramón offered various options for community-based tourism but it also has diversified its offer by trying to implement community-based tourism into its different initiatives. This means that even cooperative that performed only agricultural activities, for example, have now implemented some variable of tourism component like guesthouses or walking tours or even participatory field-experiences for their guests.

The problem was that even if I selected one initiative per community, San Ramón still hosts 96 of them so the number was too big. In order to selected three cases that could represent the municipality I talked with random stakeholders that I could find, trying to talk to at least one actor per community. After I selected the 5 most recommended cases, I rounded it up to three, depending on my personal interest with their offers.

The sample needed to represent the attributes that rural development and community capacity and community-based tourism enclose. So, to select them I also took into

account that feature and finished with the selection of El Roblar, La Garita and Los Andes. These three communities represent the cooperative movement, community-based tourism initiatives and the connection between development and environment that characterizes the rural areas of Nicaragua.

Another point was the recognition the three of them have by the municipality and their communities. Even though I was able to reduce it to three communities, each community still hosts more than one initiative so I had to talk to the people inside and make a selection of one initiative per community to have a more specific case. Overall, San Ramón marks the difference between the current approach to development the government has and introduces a more advance idea. This highlights the need for a new approach and the need to diversify the development plans in third-world countries like mine.

### 3.2. Qualitative Research

The present study is one of qualitative matter completely, based on Charles Ragin's definition of qualitative studies. Ragin implies that a qualitative research is one that emphasizes in the researcher's attempt to uncover the meaning and significance of social phenomena for the people in those settings. (Ragin, 1994) Thus qualitative and quantitative approaches are often seen as opposites, they complement each other on a natural basis.

Meaning, that although this particular research does focuses on a narrative inquiry and focuses on introducing San Ramón and its cases, it does have quantitative support annexed in the references. The presentation of the cases and interpretation of the phenomena was easier to elaborate on a qualitative basis because of the malleability of such approach. A qualitative research can be performed in almost any imaginable scenario, particularly in areas where numeric data is not available and the main goal is to identify patterns and recognize changes.

Thus being recognized under the qualitative research approach, the study holds the attributes of narrative, since this is powerful tool to transfer and share knowledge. The

introduction of these three cases is the main narrative of the study, while the discussion and interpretation of them holds the sample of the qualitative research. It is important to mention here, and throughout the research again, that these cases are small spectrums of the context, they, by no means, represent the entire municipality. San Ramón still holds 93 other communities that might enclose different approaches.

### 3.3. Case Study

The idea of using case study research method for this particular study comes from the definition provided by Robert Yin that says “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. (Yin, 2003) This description adjusts itself perfectly to the cases of San Ramón, that can’t be presented with any other research methods.

On academic aspects, the case studies allow the research to address research questions that are either descriptive or explanatory such as this case. At the same time, among the rest of them, one of my objectives is to highlight these particular cases for the first time and the case study method allows me to do so by using the community’s perspective and fulfill Ragin’s goals of Social Research.

The main aspect of case study is that because of its simplicity it allowed me to focus on more than one stakeholder instead of having to narrow it down to a single individual. This gives me greater perspective on the research and opens up the possibility to find patterns among the municipality. The multiple case studies provide a sense of contrast between the different contexts one can find in a rural community of Nicaragua.

### 3.4. Goals of Social Research

In his book *The Case Study Handbook*, William Ellet discusses the different types of cases a researcher can encounter as well as the different approaches the study can present. While explaining the main methodological scopes, he defines qualitative and quantitative research as the main ones for understand sociology and ethnography and the indisputable

relation between them both (Ellet, 2007). While Ellet might be right about the relation between quantitative and qualitative research other authors agree that for a social researcher in training and practice the qualitative method must be his main perspective, following the goals of a social research that is.

In order to understand the paradigm of a social research and the perspective of a qualitative research, such as this one, the description provided by Charles Ragin in his book *Constructing Social Research* is the most suitable. Ragin highlights seven major goals of social research which include:

1. Identifying general patterns and relationships
2. Testing and refining theories
3. Making predictions
4. Interpreting culturally or historically significant phenomena
5. Exploring diversity
6. Giving voice
7. Advancing new theories

He explains that the first three goals follow the lead of the hard sciences while fourth and sixth follow from the social nature of social science and the fifth and seventh goals link with hard science models and reflect the socially grounded nature of social research. (Ragin, 1994)

This study focuses on the social nature of social science, having as its main the interpretation of cultural and historic phenomena as well as give voice to the people in the community, specifically those that took part as focused cases. In this aspect this is a qualitative research featuring three different case studies described with a narrative inquiry. This narrative inquiry serves as a tool to share knowledge because it approves the idea of knowledge being held in stories such as the ones here introduced (Fry, Barrett, Seiling, & Whitney, 2002). At the same time I aim towards the creation of a research on Rural Development based on the initiatives of three case studies, fulfilling Ragin's final goal, which is to advance new theories.

At this point the need to explain the expansion of the narrative here introduced is needed. Although the conversations, interviews, audiovisual material and literature reviewed for this research is vast, this study does not represent the full narrative of the communities in San Ramon. The participation of three communities, and by implication three key actors was selected randomly after a focal group with community leaders and selected government officers from both the municipality and other related institutions.

At the same time and following the pattern established by both Ragin and Fry et al. the first rule for the data collection was to let people express themselves without limitations or guidance. By allowing them to say and talk about what they wanted to talk I was able to retrieve information I would've skipped otherwise. The interviewees selected the narratives on their own, their way of telling the story, their colloquial language and descriptive slang. The use of Spanish terms such as *doña*, *vieja*, *chunche*, *pues* and others that belong solely to the Nicaraguan adaptation of the language allowed them to feel comfortable and opened up about topics such as their personal lives and their real reason behind the implementation of their programs or touristic offers.

The most important aspect is the delimitation of the information. Since the stakeholders were the ones that decided which information was relevant enough to talk about and which wasn't it was easier for me to discover aspects before mentioning them. For example, during the interview with Ivania Zeledón, she explained how her life was while she was applying for a scholarship in Cuba.

Ivania decided to tell me about the people she shared a room with and where they are now, her goal was to highlight the fact that those people that were directly related to high command officers from the FSLN had just the same opportunity she had therefore her winning a scholarship was completely out of her own merit.

Stories like the one from Ivania are not published in the newspapers nor are they in a memoir album, but it is important to hear because it narrates from experience the simplicity of choosing a job or a carrier that serves as a mean for development. Her story includes the importance of networking and portrays perfectly the struggle that over 20%

of the Nicaraguan population have when it comes to having to work for the need of an income while struggling with some sort of a disease.

Since all of the interviews and the two focus groups performed during the fieldwork were not guided; the only guided part was the initial question which in most cases was “So, what do you do here and why?” the data chapters are built according to my own handwritten notes and audiovisual material. Recording the talks with the stakeholders, taking notes and every night coming back to the guesthouse where I stayed to transcribe everything allowed me to empty both my recorder and memory on a daily basis.

In my typed field notes a constant transition from Spanish to English is found as a proof of my attempt to write down every single thing I saw and experienced that day. With the help of pictures and appealing to photo elicitation for myself I took notes on my impressions of the people with every topic. For example, during my conversations with Mayra from the cooperative El Privilegio, I remember seeing her eyes water down as she mentioned her divorce, a topic she decided to talk about and a topic I didn’t know. Even though it was personal and not necessarily relevant to the investigation, it allows me to describe an aspect of her that makes her more relatable to the readers and which will eventually lead to them following up on her story and establishment of the cooperative.

### 3.5. Research Schedule

The data collection process lasted one and a half month in field in which period I went to the houses and farms of the three key actors. In this period of time the collaboration of the Municipality was key not only for transportation but to establish the primary connection with the interviewees. At the same time and in order for me to experience on first hand the guesthouses and the programs, I stayed at a guesthouse and went to all of the programs offered in the three municipalities. The cooperation of UCA San Ramon, El Sueño de la Campana Foundation and many other actors that are not mentioned in the thesis due to the length limitation was priceless.

During the first fifteen days I stayed in the capital city, examining and interviewing officers from the central government. The involvement of the national government was one of the key factors that helped San Ramón implement its initiatives. The promotion of campaigns and programs focused on tourism, as well as the adjudication of grants on an individual and cooperative basis served as an incentive for the constitution of more than half of the initiatives and programs that San Ramón currently offers. This generated a need for me to talk about the topic with officers from INIFOM, MEFFCA, Alcaldia de Managua and INTUR.

After the requested meetings with respective officers that were informed on the topic, they provided recommendations on key actors, based on their own point of view. This part of the research was fundamental for the narrowing down of the stakeholders; the three cases presented in this research were all mentioned by those interviewed in the initial process.

Once in San Ramón I took the time to also talk to the municipality of Matagalpa on a departmental level, after that, the municipality of San Ramón offered its complete help and I got to work next to Carla Tinoco. It is important to highlight the fact that I had already met Carla before during a short-term JICA training she attended during the month of February in Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. The training was focused on Capacity Building and Community Capacity Development, aspects that showed to be needed for her to perform her job once she went back to Nicaragua.

In this occasion and during that small talk, rather than an interview, Carla told me about her job as the person in charge of the tourism focused office in the municipality. She also explained to me how the different initiatives started and she mentioned a small fair the municipality holds every September, fair that I got to be a part of during my field research.

Thanks to this talk with Carla I got a better idea of the topic and the situation in San Ramón. Having this spectrum plus some documents she facilitated like the list of programs and the brochure of the last fair they held, allowed me to narrow down the

search of literature related to the topic and delimit the research as a case study. At the same time it provided an idea of the importance of the study due to its difference between other initiatives held in the country and the advantage of the spatial delimitation set by focusing only in that small yet crowded municipality.

Attached below of a detailed chronological schedule of my visit to San Ramón (Table 1). The table illustrates the entire trip since the arrival to the country until the departure back to Japan. It explains the activity performed as well as who I met during that day and meetings with the Japanese Cooperation Agency (JICA).

**Table 1: Detailed Schedule of Field Research**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Activity (Who did you meet? What information did you collect? etc. )</b>
08.16	Managua	Arrival to Nicaragua
08.17	Managua	Resting day to organize activities.
08.18	Managua	Meeting with Alcaldia de Managua to go over the progress during this past year and evaluation of the Research Plan
08.19	Managua	Meeting with JICA Nicaragua and presentation of the Research Plan to supervisors.
08.20	Managua	Meeting with INIFOM to ask for the required permission and paperwork to visit the municipality and governmental offices in Matagalpa.
08.21	Managua	First meeting with INTUR to assure the meeting with INTUR Matagalpa as well as feedback from executive agents from the institute.
08.22	Managua	Weekend
08.23	Managua	Weekend
08.24	Managua	Working at Alcaldia de Managua
08.25	Managua	Working at Alcaldia de Managua
08.26	Managua	Working at Alcaldia de Managua
08.27	Managua	Working at Alcaldia de Managua
08.28	Managua	Meeting with INIFOM to assure permissions, as well as other ministries and institutes.
08.29	Managua	Weekend
08.30	Managua	Weekend
08.31	Managua	Preparation for Departure to San Ramon and Matagalpa, ultimating details on the accomodations and interviews with stakeholders.
09.01	San Ramón	Identification of the municipality focused on the urban areas. Meeting with Carla Tinoco and Marvin Aráuz (Municipality of San Ramón). Gathered information on the urban area of San Ramón and the celebration of national holidays with the participation of the rural communities.
09.02	San Ramón	Travel to "Monte Grande" community and meeting with Monte Grande Cooperative and guest houses (first batch). Meeting with Ivania Garcia director of the guest houses cooperative for the rural area and director of the folklore dance-group "Semillas de la Cultura" (with Carla Tinoco and Monte Grande tour guide)
09.03	San Ramón	Visit to Finca Esperanza Verde and Women Cooperative "El Privilegio" in the community El Roblar. Gathered information on privately owned cooperatives, (owned privately by single communities) and specially those that are owned by women as a result of previous development initiatives. (with Carla Tinoco, Vivianne Arango and Yúcul community leaders)
09.04	San Ramón	Meeting with directors of the foundation "El sueño de la campana" and Esmilda Zeledón, entrepreneur of the one of the main cooperatives that produce passionfruit (owner of the products "Mi pasión"). Gathered information on the entrepreneurship movement directed by previous community leaders.
09.05	San Ramón	Visit to Finca La Hermandad. Gathered information on the Finca as a touristic resort and as a family-owned cooperative ready to work with international organizations in order to achieve



		development of the community. Visited the multi-level school they have at the place and eco digester.
09.06	San Ramón	Travel back to Matagalpa to start meetings with central municipality.
09.07	Matagalpa	Meeting with external cooperation division of Mayoralty of Matagalpa. Accompanied by the mayor of the city and the delegate of external cooperation. Gathered information on the initiatives lead by the main municipality of the department and which are the main NGOs that work in there.
09.08	Matagalpa	Meeting with INTUR Matagalpa. Gathered information on the main events of the department, which are considerate a key for development initiatives like the coffee route event held in august.
09.09	Matagalpa	Meeting with female-lead cooperatives of Matagalpa. Main cooperatives that work with development initiatives and are certified by the government. Gathering data of main stakeholders for development of the department inside the government.
09.10	Matagalpa	Meeting and interview to stakeholders from MEFFCA Matagalpa.
09.11	Matagalpa	Meeting and interview to random foreign and national tourists of the department. Gathered information on the importance of tourism for development in third world countries. At the same time gathered data on the perception that tourists have on the work that has been developed so far in the department.
09.12	San Ramón	Meeting and interview with Marvin Arauz in San Ramon. Gathered data con the work that NGOs have done in the municipality and how the municipality is working with the community in order to achieve local development and product promotion.
09.13	San Ramón	Travel back to Managua to organize collected data and review the provided information.
09.14	Managua	National Holiday
09.15	Managua	National Holiday
09.16	Managua	Final meeting with INTUR on the progress that the institution is making in the communities. How INTUR is helping small communities like San Ramon promote themselves as touristic destinations. Meeting with Karla Robelo, executive assistant for the director.
09.17	Managua	Meeting and interview to directives from COSEP. The private enterprise as one of the main stakeholders in the promotion of development. How they are interested in communities like San Ramon and their own key development. Meeting with Roberto Rojas, assistant to the executive director.
09.18	Managua	Final meeting with central offices of INIFOM. Provided small analisis of the gathered information during the field study. At the same time gathered information on their perspective of the development level for the municipality.
09.19	Managua	Weekend for writing
09.20	Managua	Weelend for writing
09.21	Managua	Meeting and Interview with Pro Nicaragua executive Maria Aragon. Gathered data on how governmental organizations are providing aid to developing communities in order to promote their projects and the information that they have on the reality of the status of small municipalities like San Ramon.

09.22	Managua	Meeting with Alcaldia de Managua
09.23	San Ramón	Travel to San Ramon for final interview Finca La Hermandad. Interview with Sebastian Mairena on the missing details about how they work and the way that they have consolidated themselves as a proper cooperative.
09.24	San Ramón	Final interview to Esmilda Zeledón from products "My passion" to gather the last details on the elaboration of the products and the plans she has for the future of the company. How she thinks she is going to help the municipality.
09.25	San Ramón	Data reviewing to ultimate details
09.26	San Ramón	Travel back to Managua
09.27	Managua	Preparation of the final report for Alcaldia de Managua
09.28	Managua	Final meeting and report presentation to Alcaldia de Managua
09.29	Managua	Final meeting external cooperation office of Alcaldia de Managua.
09.30	Managua	Preparation for the journey back to Japan.
10.01	Managua	Departure to Japan

#### **IV. Rural Development in Nicaragua and Matagalpa**

Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America, it is located in the exact middle of the continent and it is ranked as the fourth poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. During the past few years Nicaragua was recognized by its good performance in the coffee production business as well as exports of cattle. On tourism, it is called a hidden paradise due to its not-known offers and the low-cost of hotels and living expenses.

The country is divided in three regions, the pacific lowlands, the north central highlands and the Caribbean lowlands. The regions' names introduce the characteristic that identifies most Central American countries, having exits to both Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Each region has a different climate and costumes, having the biggest Nāhuatl influence in the north central highlands, globalization in the pacific lowlands and African-indigenous culture in the Caribbean lowlands.

This distinction has made Nicaragua a highly diverse country in population and culture. The country offers different cuisines and although the national language is Spanish, in the Caribbean lowlands and some areas of the north central highlands, native languages are still used. At the same time, Nicaragua's geography portrays a series of dark sand beaches in the pacific region where the capital is located, crystal-blue-water beaches in the Caribbean and mountainous areas constitute the northern side of the country.

Historically the country has gone through a series of ups and downs from a dictatorship n the Somoza dynasty (1927-1979) to revolution and reconstruction period (1960-1990) and the polemic politic situation with the current government and leader of the revolution, Daniel Ortega. Making politics a very sensitive topic in the country.

However, along the years, the country has managed to recover from economic challenges and reinvent its system more than five times. (Chamorro, 2008) Currently, Nicaragua is a raising touristic destination and it is focusing all of its efforts in creating an economic and social model that includes all actors and ultimately generates equality in all sectors.

#### 4.1. Current Development Situation in Nicaragua

In numbers, nearly 46% of the population lives in a poverty situation according to the World Bank, which also explains that out of that percentage, only 29% of the children complete their education. (World Bank, 2014) As a result of a wrong approach to development, Nicaragua is now ranked amongst the 10 most deforested countries in the world according to the World Health Organization, starting 2016.

As a result of the previously stated poverty situation more than 167,000 children in Nicaragua are or have been victims of child labor. Most of them work because of their parents' unstable salary situation and are forced to drop out of school. This case presents itself mainly in rural areas where children work in the fields with their parents and some migrate to the nearest by city to work in domestic houses or poorly paid jobs under illegal situations. (INIDE, 2008)

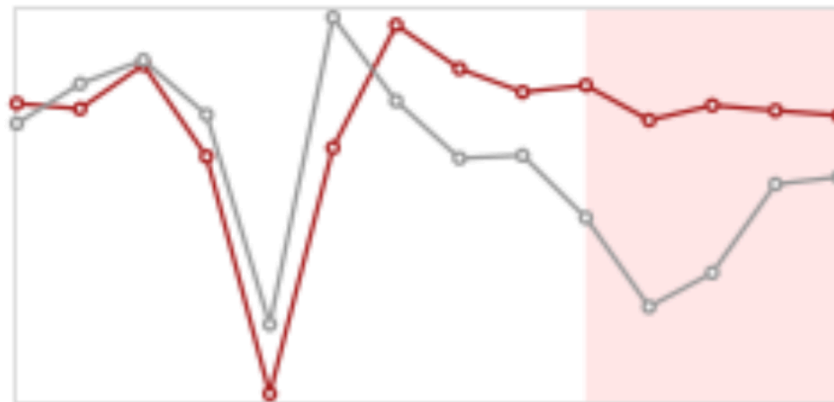
This has forced the country to aim towards foreign investment for the fulfillment of its projects. This approach is seen mostly on tourism related projects, such as the construction of luxury resorts or even small hotels. At the same time, the government has changed its focus on the main economic activity to be centered in tourism. The reason behind this was the significant increase of foreign visitors during the past years, according to the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism Nicaragua had an expansion of 25% its previous demand just in 2013. (INTUR, 2014)

Overall, Nicaragua's development situation has been historically depending on third parties that don't always have the best interest for the people. However, over the years the country has managed to overgrow the continent's GDP, according to graphs shown by the World Bank.

According to studies in 2014 (Figure 1), the projections for Nicaraguan annual GDP growth in percentage, compared to the one in Latin America & the Caribbean, focused only in developing countries. This doesn't mean Nicaragua has moved out of its position as the fourth poorest country but it does show the outcome of using different methods to approach the fight against poverty and economic stability.

Figure 1: Annual GDP Growth in Nicaragua

## Annual GDP Growth (%)



■ Nicaragua  
■ Latin America & Caribbean (developing only)

Forecast (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)

Source: The World Bank, 2014 <http://data.worldbank.org/country/nicaragua>

What could probably be characterized as Nicaragua's biggest weakness when it comes to approaching poverty is the lack of diversification in the matter. The country has only one policy when it comes to development and two ministries/institutes that supervise its implementation.

### 4.2. National Human Development Plan (PNDH)

The National Human Development Plan (PNDH) was created in the year 2012, as the first action of the current ruling government. Its time-lapse was set to be executed until the current year (2016) but according to some scholars in the country (all of them are against the government's ideology) the plan is still ongoing under less than 50% its goal and in November this year the country is to be holding presidential elections once again.

The plan introduces a model that is based on socialism as the guiding ideology of the national government. It aims towards the opening of opportunities for all citizens and increase in the amount of young entrepreneurs and producers. According to the guidelines introduced to the national Assembly, its level of success is to be measured in the economic wellbeing of the country by generating more job vacancies and overcoming poverty and social inequality as well as hunger. (Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional, 2012)

In order to support its ideas and plans, the government used the data from the previous presidential period, which was ruled by the same party. They explain that the only way to actually achieve development in the country is by changing the lives of the people and not only their financial situation. In the first presidential period, the government provided literacy programs to over 500,000 people and constitutionalized free education and health care. (Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional, 2012) Therefore, the plan was named “human development” and not only social and economic.

The most outstanding part of the plan was the historic change in the country’s main economic activity. Until now, Nicaragua’s economy had been ruled by cattle-raising and coffee beans exports, while tourism was used as a back up for extra income. The plan introduced the highlight of tourism as “a tool to fight poverty” (Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional, 2012) and encouraged departments to create new tourism offers based on the ones that received the highest rating last year in the country.

This forced many municipalities to aspire for foreign investment in order to build and create different initiatives. The biggest problem was that this plan had no prospect for the incorporation of an environmental component. So most of the projects that the municipalities were implemented were based on resources that needed to be imported from other areas of the country and needed new infrastructure of development of areas that were previously natural reserves.

At the same time, the apogee of tourism caused by the PNDH meant that many small businesses became irrelevant for governmental offices and communities had to adjust to this new approach. Many people decided to quit their initial business and work for bigger tourism companies. Products and providers were lost and although GDP kept growing, the country lost initiatives that had potential and possibilities of sustainability.

The other problem was the lack of cultural values in the PNDH. By this, I don't mean to say that the plan had no contemplation of cultural resources, but it mentioned the need for highlight on those cultural resources that were the most famous amongst tourists. Meaning that dances, theater, poetry and even art from other departments needed to be duplicated and exported around the country.

The initial years of implementation of the PNDH proved it to be very complicated and showed the need for transformation. As a matter of fact, the initial progress reports released by the government showed little to no-change in rural municipalities but financial increase in urban municipalities where the resources were being taken from. However, education did change and health services improved in overall statistics, which showed that it was not a complete failure of the plan, it just needed to be adapted from a different perspective in each municipality.

Today, the government has launched its new plans for development to be carried out in the next presidential period, were they to win the upcoming elections in 2016. This plan host the opportunity for each municipality to develop different approaches and use its own resources tourism as well as combine them with nearby municipalities. The PNDH was for a long period of time the only policy the government had for development and learning from its mistakes, almost every presidential candidate has now launched at least three different approaches of policies for development.

Tourism remains as the country's main tool for poverty and with the subsequent reports in 2014, 2015 and 2016 it has been an example of success amongst departments in the central-north highlands. Mixing the country's history with its culture has also been

enough to attract investment for tourism, which focuses on national aspects instead of luxury resorts.

#### 4.3. Overview of the Department of Matagalpa

Matagalpa is one of the most famous departments in the center-north region of Nicaragua. It covers a region of 8,523 km<sup>2</sup> and according to a 2010 census; it is the home of 655,900 people. The capital municipality is Matagalpa city, which harbors 250,000 inhabitants. Famous for its low temperatures and mountain views, 13 municipalities constitute the “Perla del Septentrión” (Pearl of the North), as it is known in Spanish. The geographical divisions show the size of each community (Figure 2):

1. Ciudad Darío
2. Esquipulas
3. Matagalpa
4. Matiguas
5. Muy Muy
6. Rancho Grande
7. Río Blanco
8. San Dionisio
9. San Isidro
10. San Ramón
11. Sébaco
12. Terrabona
13. El Tuma-La Dalia



Figure 2: Map of Matagalpa



Source: Maps of the World Website- <http://www.mapsofworld.com/nicaragua/matagalpa-map.html>

According to the Nicaraguan Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA- due to its name in Spanish), Matagalpa is the most diversified region in the country, producing coffee, beans, corn, cattle, milk products, a variety of tropical fruits (such as passion fruit, strawberries, oranges, tangerines, pineapple, and else), vegetables, wood, gold and flowers. The flora and fauna of Matagalpa have made it suitable for ecotourism.

Being most famous for its coffee productions, Matagalpa is one of the five departments that make up the “Coffee Route”. This is an event held by the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism and the Ministry of Family, Community, Cooperative and Associative Economy (MEFCCA) that also takes places in the departments of Estelí, Jinotega, Madriz and Nueva Segovia. Held permanently, the event has a peak on a yearly basis every August, when government officers from the Institute of Tourism and potential investors travel this

route awarding prizes and diplomas to the best coffee, the most eco-friendly producer, the best new producer and product, among others.

#### 4.4. Matagalpa's approach to Rural Development

Making use of the Coffee Route, Matagalpa has applied the PNDH as its main and only policy for development. The local government is aiming towards the promotion of historic and environmental tourism in the entire department. They have created different plans, brochures and even videos promoting destinations in the department and activities that tourists can do. However, they follow the PNDH policies so exactly that they started to introduce resources from León and Masaya.

The biggest challenge for Matagalpa was that it receives mainly only seasonal tourism, that peak in the summer time when the department's temperature is by far more enjoyable than the one in the rest of the country. Due to its mountainous areas and long rivers, all the municipalities of Matagalpa receive both national and international tourists that arrive with tour-agencies from the capital city. During this period, the department hosts different festivals and local fairs that provide the opportunity to small producers to promote their programs and products. By the end of summer and with the start of the rainy season or winter, the department receives almost no tourists because of heavy rains and poor roads construction in the different municipalities.

Using the money from the peak-touristic season, Matagalpa implements different educational programs that try to fight illiteracy and it has opened 5 technical schools for people to become electric technicians, carpenters and kitchen assistants; all of this in the frame of developing the touristic offer in time for next year's peak season. It also trains touristic guides that specialize in historic tourism and adventure tourism.

At the same time, they have opened their own tour-operator called "Matagalpa Tours", which belongs to the department and hosts programs in all of the municipalities. Characterizing the narrowness of the PNDH, however, both the educational programs and the tour-operator don't go beyond those points and avoid the malleability that is need in

order for it to show integral development results in all municipalities. For example, other than the museums, the historic tourism tour-guides don't have large fields and local sites that were the scenario for historical battles or houses of national heroes are not included.

The one significant difference on the development plan of Matagalpa and the PNDH is the incorporation of an environmental component. In Matagalpa, the environment's well being is an obligation that every touristic offer has to comply to. Meaning that tourists are not allowed to litter and both flora and fauna have to be respected at all times. Endangered species are introduced to tourists and the also present the government's efforts to protect such species.

Nevertheless, the environmental component in the department's development doesn't go beyond this and natural resources that stand out in this area (image 1) over other departments and municipalities of the country aren't used. Instead, for example, of promoting guesthouses or even hotels in the mountains where tourists can get in touch with nature, the offer limits itself to hotels that are privately owned by foreigners and located in the urban areas.

Local culture from the native tribes in Matagalpa is slowly fading away and languages that were used as well as indigenous knowledge are not promoted. Even though the approach that Matagalpa is using on its own development plan differs from that established in the PNDH, it is still fully guided by it and the local government limits itself to the use of only that single framework

**Image 1: Overview of the city of Matagalpa**



Overview of the city of Matagalpa  
Source: The author-2015

## V. San Ramón's plan for Development

### 5.1. San Ramón Municipality Overview

Near the capital municipality of the Department of Matagalpa, there is a small municipality called San Ramón, it is constituted by 96 communities and divided into two main zones: rural and urban. Located in the center of the department and with a small area of 424 km<sup>2</sup> it holds a population of 30,682 people out of which more than half are from rural ascendance. All together San Ramon is divided in two sectors (or zones) that have 11 neighborhoods that have 96 communities that have more than 100 counties (figure 3). This division is similar to a circle circuit, being this main characteristic of all the rural municipalities of Nicaragua.

Figure 3: San Ramón's political division



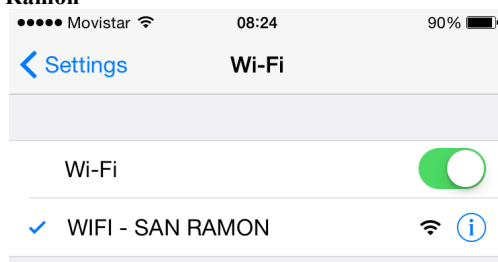
Source: The author/September 2015

Within both sectors, there is only a small area of the municipality that is classified as urbanized. This area is located in the main San Ramón, where the branches of governmental offices are located. The following is a list of all the governmental offices that serve the municipality; these offices are all characterized by having a very small administrative capacity.

- 1 Police Station
- 1 Healthcare Center (+ Matagalpa Departmental Hospital 2 km away from the main urban area)
- 1 Primary School
- 1 Secondary School
- 1 Childcare Center/ Kindergarten (+ institute for children development that serves lunch to children during the day)
- 1 City Hall Jury Office (this holds only one room where both permanent and substitute judges work)
- 1 Municipality City Hall (redesigned in 2008)
- 1 Branch Office for the Ministry of Education

In order to understand how these offices work, two will be characterized in both workforce and capacities. The first one is the Municipality City Hall; its main offices are located right in the middle of the urban area of the municipality, behind the main city park (which is now enabled with WIFI for the community to use; image 2). The offices were reconstructed in 2008 thanks to a donation of foreign investors. It is mainly divided in two sectors, planning and construction and promotion of services. The first sector is in charge of the maintenance of pavement streets and governmental buildings as well as services for the population. At the same time it is the one that allocates services such as reconstruction of old and new structures.

**Image 2: Wi-Fi network in San Ramón**



Source: The author, September 2015

The second sector, promotion of services holds offices focused in both tourism and population services such as birth certificates and land ownership. In order to work as a fully developed office, there was a modification of the working structure and a new office came into existence, the Office for Local Economic Development (DEL due to its name in Spanish “Oficina de Desarrollo Economico Local”). This office has made its way into the municipality’s recognition and is now known as one of the main tools when it comes to tourism. San Ramon is slowly evolving into an “eco-touristic” town and the DEL is the one of the government’s tools to provide help and guide to those that wants it.

The following map presents the communities that make up San Ramón and it provides a very accurate and precise idea on how the roads along the municipality are. There is only one main road that surrounds San Ramón, which is pavement built. This road leads to the other municipalities that surround San Ramón and it was constructed mainly for trucks and buses that travel around the area from Matagalpa to Estelí.

At the same time, the small green area that points where the number 1 is the urban area of the municipality that is mentioned above. The map provides an actual idea of how the municipality in its entirety looks. The rest of the roads that go around the place are all still rural and in order to reach most of them one needs a car with double traction (figure 4).

**Figure 4: Map of San Ramón**



Map of San Ramón

Source: <http://corneroflove.org/es/donde-servimos/>

According to a 2014 municipal description made by the DEL, 85% of San Ramón has access to electric energy and public lightning. At the same time, in order to move from one micro-region to the other, in the case of those that don't have pavement streets, there is a municipal taxi service. People make use of public transportation to send things from one place to the other, such as buses, taxis or even the Nicaraguan well-recognized Moto-taxis or *caponeras* (small motorcycles designed with an extra carriage to transport people, similar to the Thai *tuk-tuk*). However, this lack of transportation or lack of easy access to some communities has marked the culture of the people in San Ramon. It is very common to see how a private vehicle provides a ride to everyone the driver encounters on the way, people help each other as much as they can in that aspect.

#### 5.1.1. Telecommunications

San Ramón is one of the few rural municipalities that have coverage from both of the carriers in Nicaragua (Claro and Movistar). At the same time, Internet is available in many public internet-cafes and the park located in the urban area. However, this service is not available in all the municipality, the communities located very much in the center of the rural area, the middle of San Ramón, don't have access to internet and telephone service fails many times. Starting 2009 a Post Office was established in San Ramón and it also works as a "Western Union" center for people to receive and send money from other parts of the country or overseas (remittances).

#### 5.1.2. Potable water

The service of potable water or sanitized water resources for San Ramon is still one of the main weaknesses for the municipality. On a national basis the ministry in charge for water supply is called ENACAL and in this case it provides clean and drinkable water to almost all of the areas in the urban area. Rural area however still depends on wells dogged by the people. This water still needs a process of cleaning and depuration in order to be good for human consumption. However, this process is very expensive and many rural communities still rely on international cooperation to do it.



### 5.1.3. Education

In order to achieve a sustainable development San Ramon knows that they need to aim for the younger generation. Therefore, education is one of the main areas that the government is trying to improve. Aside from the unique schools located in the urban area, rural areas of San Ramón also have a total of 77 multi-level schools that serve them (image 3). According to the report presented by the mayoralty in 2014<sup>1</sup> 10,860 out of which circa 120 people are working citizens that have taken part in literacy programs provided by the government.

**Image 3: Kindergarten in San Ramón**



Local Kindergarten renewed in 2014 by the municipal government.  
Source: the author

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<sup>1</sup> Diagnostico e inventario turistico San Ramon "Tierra Fertil e Indigena" (Diagnosis and touristic inventory San Ramon "Fertile and Indigenous Land"). - Oficina de Atención y Promoción a pequeños negocios con énfasis en turismo, Alcaldia de San Ramón.



#### 5.1.4. Health Services

In Nicaragua the Ministry of Public Health is the one in charge of assuring facilities and resources to provide attention for rural municipalities. In San Ramon there is no hospital, however with the remodeling of the urban area a public healthcare center came along. Although it is located in the urban area, it tries to provide assistance for rural communities. This healthcare center covers a relatively large demand of patients everyday with only a short staff of around 15 people. Cases that require immediate assistance in rural areas, are faced with the lack of an ambulance, therefore both the municipal offices and police department loan their cars when needed.

Like most of the rural communities in Nicaragua, San Ramon has an alternative medicine and naturist pharmacy. This small pharmacy was opened in the years 1990, after the revolution, and it was initially created as the focus activity for the Christian promotional Center for Peace and Life, with the objective of helping children with high malnutrition levels in areas where medicine wasn't available but natural resources such as medicinal plants had their highest production ranks. Nowadays the center focuses not only on natural medicine but also cultural activities and drug abuse prevention.

Over the years this naturist pharmacy has managed to promote San Ramon's ancient medical culture. According to an interview performed by the author to one of the managers of the pharmacy, San Ramon's native people (called Yucul in their own language) were known for being warriors and their wives had to learn how to help themselves out of plants in order to help them recover from the battle wounds.

Most of the medicine sold in this pharmacy is produced by rural communities and packed in the Center; the money gathered from the sales is directed to rural communities, providing them with medicine, both natural and chemical.

#### 5.1.5. Housing

The housing situation in San Ramon is very particular (image 4), as mentioned above most of the area is rural. Most of the houses are built with wood, bricks and zinc sheets. The area that surrounds the urban side was built, in its majority, during or before the revolution and no maintenance has been done. It is very common to see old adobe houses next to the “new” brick or in some cases concrete houses that cover the previous structure.

Just like most of the rural communities in Nicaragua, San Ramon has very high conditions of vulnerability. The biggest problem is the lack of resources and previous preparation that rural communities put in the process of urbanization. San Ramón has communities located next to ravines without a proper study of the soil or risks that the area presents. At the same time, even though it is rich in natural resources other communities are located nowhere near water resources and families have to travel big distances to obtain them.

**Image 4: Housing in San Ramón**



Houses in the urban area- contrast with original infrastructures and renewed one.  
Source: the author, 2015

#### 5.1.6. Economic Activities

San Ramon's main economic activity is the cultivation of basic grains and crops, cattle rising and coffee production have decreased within the years due to plagues that affected the area over five years ago and the high cost of production. All of these activities take place in the rural communities; the urban area's economy is oriented towards commerce as the administrative center of the municipality.

Corn has the first place on the production of basic grains with a 59.27% production rate average per year, followed by red and black beans with a 40.23%. These two crops are the basic for the Nicaraguan diet, particularly in the rural areas because of their longevity. Particularly corn can be kept in dried areas and easily processed without using harmful chemicals. This is the reason why most of the product is destined to national consumption rather than exports.

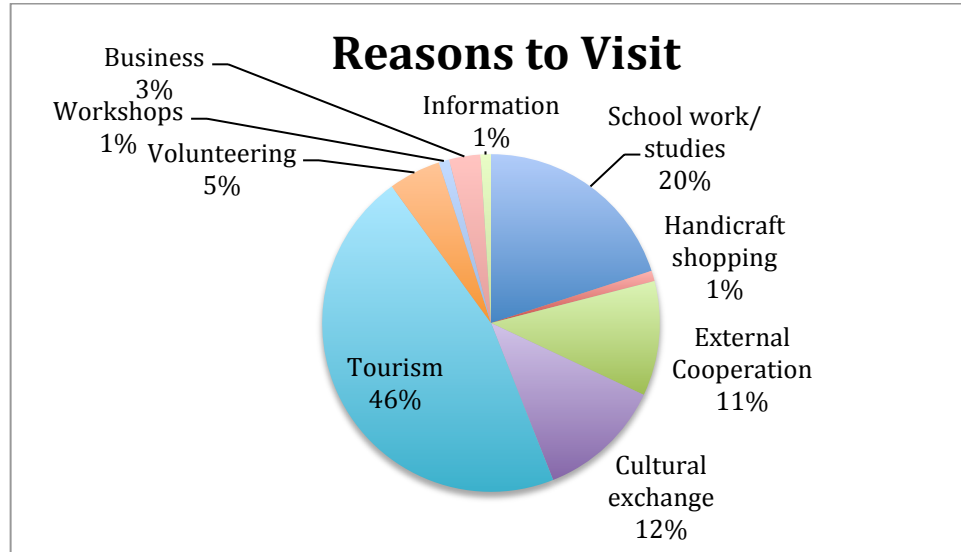
In the case of San Ramón, 100% of its coffee production is destined for sale, usually exports. National institutions and non-governmental organizations come together in order to help producers improve their coffee beans and successfully fill all the international standards. Currently there are over 10 coffee cooperatives in rural areas of San Ramón that are qualified to export their coffee beans and sell it to the highest bidder. However, due to the lack of education on the matter, many coffee producers are forced to sell it to local retailers that pay less than half of the actual worth.

#### 5.1.7. Tourism

According to statistical data of the municipal tourism secretary, by the year 2013, 4,855 tourists were counted in. These data correspond to only 10 entrepreneurs that bring information to the office every month. Which means that the corresponding amount of tourist to more than half of the business owners in the municipality is still unknown.

Out of these tourists 59% are males and 41% are women, being only 33% of the grand total national tourists. The following pie chart (table 2) presents the main reasons, on percentage level, to visit San Ramón.

**Table 2: Reasons for tourism in San Ramón**



Source: The author, Dec. 2015

Out of all the tourists around 20% of them visited the municipality for school purposes, 1% to buy handicrafts, 11% as part of external cooperation alliances, 12% for cultural exchange, 46% merely for touristic purposes, 5% in volunteering programs, 1% in workshops, 3% for business and 1% only for information.

## VI. El Roblar- Cooperative El Privilegio

Image 5: Entrance of San Ramón



Sign at the entrance of the Community El Roblar- Source: the author

### 6.1. Land Rights 1960

After a liberal-conservative revolution and a constitutionalist war, US Marines ruled Nicaragua until in 1934 when they gave the power to 4000 soldiers from the National Guard, led by Anastasio Somoza Garcia. Somoza Garcia was elected by the ambassador of the United States in the country and sworn fidelity to the commands and deals that were made between them both. One of those deals was the succession of land rights, made official in 1960. (Pellini, 2015)

Somoza Garcia ruled the country for 10 years, from 1937 to 1947, but his family maintained the power until 1979 when the Sandinista revolution started. Since the Somozas were related to the previous president, Mr. Sacasa, the constitution didn't allow them to run for presidency; which led them to seek support from the United States. With their support Somoza Garcia got rid of his opposition, including Augusto C. Sandino, main figure of the resistance in Nicaragua. Soldiers of the National Guard murdered Sandino in February 1939 using American armament. (Borge, 2012)

In order to train the National Guard, the United States Marines and Army left delegates in Nicaragua. These delegates, who were part of special brigades from the US army and Marine Corps, moved to Nicaragua with their families and the government promised to give them lands to settle. Since most of the trainings happened in the mountains and rural areas of the country, and in order to keep them in the same place where those against the regime were, they were allocated in areas like San Ramón.

Knowing that this civil war was only temporary, and foreseeing the possibility of losing, Somoza Debayle (son of Somoza Garcia), granted the Americans property titles in 1960 and left at least 42% of the country in hands of foreigners. One of the most assigned places was San Ramón due to the geographic position of the lands. In the case of El Roblar, it is located in the border between El Tuma and Matagalpa, which made it key for the supervision of rebels. At the same time, small rural communities like El Roblar didn't have big population and it was easy to divide it into lots.

The smallest lot was rounded into 32 hectares, which is big enough to grow a wide diversity of crops and build a farm to live in. Since most of the foreigners that were settled in these areas had families and moved in with them, housekeeping and farming service was needed. This gave opportunity for all those that needed work and wanted to run away from the war to seek jobs and remain in a status of refugees in the rural areas.

Seeking to reduce the discontent of the people in the rural communities and maintain the image of a democratic government, Somoza gave NGO and non-NGO workers from different countries the opportunity to apply for one of those lands. Those who were interested had to send a letter to the ministry in charge explaining their activities in the country and how long they were planning to stay in the country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had the last decision on who was granted a land and who wasn't. Even though no land in the capital city was given, the government had strict laws to regulate the activities of foreigners in the country, to assure they were not supporting people against the regime and in cases where foreigners were suspected or discovered to be helping the previously

mentioned rebels, were either deported or sentenced to death, charged with political interventionism. (Gilles Bataillon, 1998)

In the case of those that were granted a piece of land, either in the northern or central region of the country, a special law was passed that tied them to the condition of having to provide work places for the people in the communities, especially those that lived there previously. This meant that the lands that were being given were not all free lots and in the case of San Ramón, according to the archives in the municipality, people previously owned 3 out of 5 lots given from the municipality. (Tinoco, Story of San Ramón, 2015)

Simultaneously another law was passed in the capital city. The national government approved a law to give lands to those foreigners who had “influence” in the country’s economy. This meant, all those foreigners that were providing financial support to the activities performed by Somoza and his family, as well as foreigners that were presented as investors for the country’s products. Nicaragua was cut out of international economic treaties after the war started and the country went into an economic lockdown. The government was supported by the United States and certain stakeholders that had strong friendship bonds with Somoza and were given asylum in the country to perform their economic activities without being charged over taxes. (Gilles Bataillon, 1998)

On the other side of the country, Municipal Government of San Ramón, which was ruled by one of Somoza’s staff members, went over to obey the rules. In 1960 a total of 63 lots were given to foreigners who moved to San Ramón. The Municipal Office signed property titles with approval from National Government and lands were divided to allocate in each lot a water source and enough land for harvesting and accommodations.

In the case of the community of El Roblar, inhabitants started working for foreigners living in the area. The workers were provided with accommodations as part of their contract, following the rules stated by the national government. The work consisted in farming and running errands for the male workers, while the female workers were

allocated in the kitchen and in charge of the children. Some landlords gave women work in the field as well, and their children were left to work in the kitchen.

Education stopped during that period of time and children of workers didn't go to school beyond the second grade, learning only the basics of writing and reading.

## 6.2. Sandinista Revolution 1980-1989

Lead by the “*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*” (FSLN) the revolution was a historic process for Nicaragua, based on the ideas of Augusto C. Sandino, who was the first person to oppose the Somoza's dictatorship during the 1960s. The opposition group FSLN was constituted with one single goal and it was to finish what Sandino started before Somoza murdered him. Both men and women got together and fought against an army of contra-revolutionaries (contras) in the capital city and rural communities.

Municipal governments, all over the country, provided asylum to the National Guard and was commanded to obey the rules dictated by the Somoza government. One of these rules was, to apprehend immediately any individual against the regime and if he or she proved to be of interest to the revolutionaries, they were taken to the capital city where the National Guard held them prisoners until their execution.

Although the revolution had the support of the people, families in rural areas, especially the north, feared for their safety and their lives since the anti had demonstrated power. With the support of the United States and other developed countries, against first-possessed weapons and training provided by the US Marines. While the revolutionaries were determined to fight with farm tools and chemical compositions, mainly based on alcohol and methanol.

Noticing the disadvantage that characterized the revolution, fearful families took refuge in the mountains, changing cities and working for foreigners who were granted lands. One of the busiest migrations was the migration from the city of Estelí to the mountains



of Matagalpa. Thus, according to the census of the City Hall, 147 families arrived in San Ramon fleeing the war. (Tinoco, Story of San Ramón, 2015)

One of these families was the Gámez family; young Mayra (image 6), her mother and her siblings arrived in San Ramón from Estelí and started working for one of the landlords from the United States. Mayra's mother had already lost her husband during the war and having recruitments on a daily basis, she decided to move to San Ramón and work in exchange for asylum and the lives of her children. Her older siblings started working as farmers alongside with her mother, while she worked in the kitchen and taking care of the children. (Gámez, 2015)

**Image 6: Mayra Gámez**



Gámez in her coffee field during the interview.  
Source: the author, 2015

On July 19<sup>th</sup> 1979 the FSLN entered the capital city to fight the dictatorship and force the Somoza family out of the country. With the support of the people from Nicaragua, the FSLN lead a 5 people board that lead and administered the country as a conjoined pro-tempore assembly, with the war still ongoing.

During this period the constitution written by Somoza was overruled and progressive and anti-imperialist reforms were applied. An intensive literacy campaign was carried in the rural communities of the country and lands and properties of the Somoza families and their immediate allies were nationalized and used for public projects such as schools, hospitals and municipal offices.

Meanwhile immigrants from the sectors benefited by the Somoza dictatorship, including those that were granted lands during the '60s, fled the country and were exiled to Miami were those who had economic power and political influences operated strongly against the revolution. Simultaneously, members from the National Guard fled to Honduras and Costa Rica and used those places as headquarters for the attacks against the revolutionaries in the mountains.

During this period, and even though Somoza had fled the country, military service was mandatory, by order of the pro-tempore assembly. This military service had the goal of building a national army to fight the contras and National Guard that was still fighting. This process lasted a decade and on 1989 the first constitutional elections were carried in the country and Daniel Ortega was named president of the country.

In the meantime, and in order to abide international law, the international community residing in Nicaragua withdraws itself from the country. Both allied countries to the Somoza government and the FSLN, withdraw their delegates from the country until it recovers political stability, pledging their support for the economic stabilization of the country once the war process is over. Some nations such as Cuba and Venezuela, however, send remittances to Nicaragua to provide supplies to the population. (González Casado, Sabáter, & Trayner, 2013)

Having ended a war and officially on its way to recovery, the country was restructured, including both men and women in the process. Municipal governments were no longer a property of Somoza and were free to decide their own destiny. In the case of San Ramón the municipal government elected was from the FSLN and once the presidential elections' results were announced they assured to provide transportation for everyone to travel to the capital city and celebrate.

### 6.3. Agrarian Reform 1990

By the time the new government settled in the country and Nicaragua started building itself again, wealthy landlords from foreign countries owned 80% of the lands. According to Jaime Wheelock Román, 40% of these landlords were direct family of Somoza, owning a total of 8 million hectares. Once the Somoza regime was toppled the Sandinista government constitutionally started what was called “Decree No. 782: Agrarian Reform Law”.

Even though the decree was passed and approved in 1981, once the pro-tempore assembly took the leadership, its effect didn’t started until 1990 when its goals were re-established. With an economic, social and political context, the reform aimed towards the development of a sustainable agriculture practice in the country. Empowering the rural communities and providing them with the resources they needed to fulfill this goal. Because of this, the Nicaraguan agrarian reform is considered one of the most unique and aggressive ones. A decade after its proclamation, 1990, 53.9% of the lands were in the hands of the people.

The municipality government worked alongside the government to ensure the rights of the people was kept. They made a territorial census in order to divide the communities in plots. Using a registry, the municipality noted the names of those that had been working in the lands and that had settled in them after the international community left. In the case of El Roblar, a small community in San Ramón, the people retook the land the way they could since the reform didn’t listed this community to be served immediately.

People like Mayra Gámez, who was married by then, took a lot of land on behalf of her and her husband’s name. The land where they were working since she moved with her mother was divided among the people that worked there and they started growing corn and beans, and coffee on a smaller scale. She settled in the property with her husband and built her family, teaching them how to farm.

That same year, the reform reached San Ramón and the land was registered under Mayra's name. Since there were over 20 communities effectuating the agrarian reform, property titles were not yet given but the municipality did recognize the owners on national jurisdiction. Alongside with the community's work, the lands were used for cropping of basic grains and these were sold inside the municipality for its own subsistence.

#### 6.4. Beginning of Cooperative Movement in El Roblar 1991

A year after the agrarian reform, the International Community retook its relations with Nicaragua, enhancing them in a context of a country on its way to economic stability and political restructuration. One of the challenges that the international community faced during this process was the lack of internal organization in the rural communities.

Small rural areas such as San Ramón had already started to harvest basic crops such as corn, beans and coffee. An even though the main producers were recognized by the community and encouraged by it, there was no structure to organize them in a group. No networks were built among each other and there was no collaboration among the producers. This led to the first idea of the cooperation from the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, the constitution of a cooperative movement inside the communities.

Still on its way of reconstruction and political stabilization, the national government made its goal to promote local businesses and collaboration with communities. The Ministry of Economy set itself as a goal the insertion of national products into the economy, to help the economic growth in the country, using the slogan "Buying local, growing national". (Tinoco, Story of San Ramón, 2015)

Following this goal, the government reinstituted and re-established governmental ministries branches in the municipalities. The missing ministries were constituted such as the Ministry of Family and Childhood (MIFAMILIA), Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure (MTI) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX). (Alcaldía de Managua, 2014). The re-establishment of these offices in the municipalities helped the

reconstruction of the communities and in the case of San Ramón its ministries such as transportation and infrastructure played a key role in the reconstruction process.

The municipal government, ruled by the FSLN party, started a process of border delimitation around the communities. Delimitating boundaries helped the communities establish an inside network, naming local leaders that will later on come to build the emblematic Agrarian Cooperatives Union in the municipality. These leaders worked with the municipal government to perform a census, registering the amount of people living in each community, collecting specific data of ages, family members and genders. (Tinoco, Story of San Ramón, 2015)

In El Roblar, the community took development by its own hands and followed the example of other communities in the municipality by creating cooperatives to work together divided according to their main crops. These cooperatives were simply structured and merely president, secretary and treasurer constituted their assemblies. The reason behind this was the lack of knowledge people had on the topic, so they created cooperatives the best way they could and understanding that their main goal was just to agglomerate farmers dividing them according to their product. (Gámez, 2015)

One of the social characteristics of the countryside in Nicaragua is the main leadership by men. Rural societies in the country are patriarchal and women are used to stay home and take care of the children. Even though during the period of the war, women had more leading roles, working on the fields and working as commanders of the revolution, this sudden change for a period of 10 years was justified by the absence of men in the households. Many women suffered the consequences of their participation in new activities, being victims of rape and abuse by the men that were left behind.

By the time the revolution ended society came back to its regular activities and men were leading the reconstruction process in rural areas. The capital city stood out because of the involvement of female activists during the process, but rural areas didn't change. El Roblar is a proof of this behavior; by the time the community decided to start building

cooperatives and with the support of the international community, men were the leaders of the initiative.

Although single women made up to 48% of the population in El Roblar, they were not included in the cooperative, instead of that they were represented by their neighbors that were males and allowed to be part of the cooperative. Mayra Gámez stayed home and supported her husband's participation in a cooperative called "El Roblar". Named so on behalf of the community, it was the coffee cooperative the one that was chosen to have this name due to the large amount of coffee producers in the area. (Gámez, 2015)

Initially, the main crops were corn and beans, but with the pass of the war coffee's demand went higher and people started changing their fields after the foreign landlords left. Coffee was seen as the main product starting 1990 and the community wanted to stand out from the other communities in the municipality with their coffee beans. (Molina, 2015) Everyone in the community showed support to the Cooperative El Roblar and helped them with the constitution of it according to the model they had.

The creation of the Cooperative El Roblar was the push the community needed to set themselves a goal. Three other cooperatives were constituted within that year; all of them were lead by men and all of them with the support of international organizations. A total of 89% of the producers were part of a cooperative, depending on their main product some families were part of more than one cooperative, having two different delegates in each cooperative. (Molina, 2015)

#### 6.5. Agrarian Cooperatives Union in San Ramon 1992

With a fast increase of the creation of cooperatives, San Ramón was forced to create an organization in which all of them could set goals and share information with each other. This leads to the birth of the Agrarian Cooperatives Union in San Ramón (UCA San Ramón). In this union all of the cooperatives from the municipality were granted a place to share information and allocate resources for their own development.

During this period of time the international community was already established in the country completely. Providing support in the creation of institutions that worked for self-sustaining communities and ODA loans as well as Grants, the international community aimed towards a total recovery of the Nicaraguan economy. One of the beneficiaries of the Grants was UCA San Ramon, being provided with funds to establish an office big enough to hold meetings with the boards of the cooperatives from the entire municipality.

The National Government on his side started promoting institutions that worked in the communities, particularly in rural communities affected by the war, as well as ministries to help these institutions whether they were governmental or non-governmental institutions. Branch offices were relocated in different departments, building more than one office inside the same department in order to have as many offices as needed according to the amount of communities and municipalities that each department had.

Inside the departments, the Municipal Government started networking with international community, aiming to the obtainment of donations. Further beyond, the Municipal Government of San Ramón applied to receive not financial donations but education. With a need for training in cooperative work as well as reorganization for the municipality, they applied to international non-governmental organizations such as the Sister Communities of North Carolina. Their goal was to assure local security and progress in the economic activities, having a fully trained staff. (Arauz, 2015)

Inside the community, the people from El Roblar started to expand their cooperatives, constituting more than one cooperative per category. Once the possibilities expanded for everyone in the community and the community leaders (non-political and political leaders) assured a 100% of producers to be part of at least one cooperative, they created a list in which the name of each producer was listed, as well as the cooperative he belonged to, specifications about his farm and product and their input inside the cooperative. (Molina, 2015)

This list served to the constitution of UCA San Ramón, gaining credibility in the department. By the time UCA San Ramón was fully constituted according to the law, it gained attention from young professionals in the field of agriculture and engineering. These professionals came to build the staff that currently works in the office and they shared information to make a central station for all the cooperatives of San Ramón. Having professional staff and the resources to provide training to the farmers, UCA San Ramón opened an office in the central street of the urban area and created teams to visit the communities on a daily basis.

On the other hand, women started realizing the need to have a role in the cooperative movement. The creation of UCA San Ramón with both male and female professionals opened a door to the female producers. Mayra Gámez was divorced from her husband and was producing coffee on her own. She gathered a group of women that were going through the same situation as she was: producing coffee and selling it as individuals was harder now that everyone was part of a cooperative except for them. Mayra invited her friends from El Roblar and requested them to spread the word around other women from the municipality that were experiencing the same condition.

UCA San Ramón had no rule against female or male producers; as a matter of fact other communities in San Ramón already had female only cooperatives, as well as conjoined cooperatives (both females and male producers). The training in leadership and cooperative work was provided in the communities first and then a special session for the board was given, requesting them to train their members after they finished the course.

#### 6.6. The creation of GEMAS 2000

With the grouping of women increasing and the opportunity to receive training from UCA San Ramon, the Cooperative El Roblar was dissolved and some members left to other cooperatives while the remaining ones constituted themselves in a free cooperative of male coffee producers and registered itself in UCA San Ramón under the name Daniel Teller Cooperative, to honor the youngest commander of FSLN, killed during the revolution.



In the year 2000 the National government started providing funds for these trainings as well as for the cultivation of lands. These funds were given in loans and entitled to cooperatives only. In case those applying were not a legally constituted cooperative, organized and recognized groups of producers that worked with UCA San Ramón could also apply under their administration.

In order to make it easier for the implied organizations and to assure the effectiveness of this process, the municipal government performed a census in the communities. Gathering data about the cooperatives and groups in these communities made it easier for them to receive the benefits of this new initiative. An initiative that besides the training and funds for cultivation also provided follow-up by UCA San Ramón.

Inside the communities, there was a clear division of the cooperatives and renaming of the groups before they were registered. Male and female integrated cooperatives divided themselves and divided the coffee cooperatives of El Roblar into two: Daniel Teller and the women's group called GEMAS (Women's group in solidary savings). The community acknowledged the need to divide the cooperatives, to be more inclusive and give an equal opportunity to all producers to receive training and funding for their lands.

UCA San Ramón created the official listing of cooperatives from the municipality, detailing on its database the directors, secretaries and treasurers, as well as main product and years of existence. This database also explained the election process of each group and how these elections for the board were going to be performed. Even though there was no involvement of UCA San Ramón during the election process, they held this on the database to proof the organization of the cooperatives and the initiative of the people. (Molina, 2015)

Mayra Gámez was officially elected as the president of the newly constituted group GEMAS. The members of the group decided to name her president not only because of her leadership during the process, or because the idea of creating a group for their own

was hers; Gámez was elected because her goal was clear: she wanted to get attention from the international and national organizations and be part of the trainings. She wanted women producers to be taken into account in the decision-making process.

#### 6.7. Creation of “El Privilegio” 2001

**Image 7: Cooperative Sign**



Sign of the Cooperative at the Entrance of the Community-  
Source: the author 2015

A year after the census was made and a database was established, trainings began in the communities and they showed to be successful within that same year. According to the records of UCA San Ramón, production increased by 43% within the first year. This increase was not only in the communities that had already received training but also those that were close by. Communities were showing a strong bond between each other, fulfilling the first goal of UCA San Ramón and the international community. (UCA San Ramón, 2015)

However, some groups were not legally constituted as cooperatives and in order to apply for certain trainings they needed to have the legal permission that proved them as such. The support of UCA San Ramón was undeniable in this process, they worked together with these groups to guide them during the legal process of recognition and they financed all the legal paperwork that needed to be done. Parallel to this, the brigades that were

assigned to the communities were working on trainings and workshops based on production and processing of products.

Since they had to reset their cooperative and find a new name, the Cooperative Daniel Teller set itself to the election of a new board. Remaining a male-producers-only cooperative, they opened enrollment to new members that wanted to join them. Following the ideals established by the Cooperative El Privilegio, they offered their new members the opportunity to receive training and be part of workshops that would increase their effectiveness. Once they were settled with their new and remaining members, the election process was carried out. (Gutierrez, 2015)

As the Cooperative El Privilegio was still not legally registered as such, they asked UCA San Ramón for their support and started the process of recognition. In order to do this, the legal department of the municipality requires them to perform a new election once they are granted the permission to practice as a cooperative and be part of the workshops as well as trainings provided by UCA San Ramón and other governmental entities.

In this period of time Mayra Gámez was again elected as the president of the cooperative and accepted to carry out the responsibility for a period of four years. Gámez established strong bonds with UCA San Ramón, working hand-to-hand facilitating workshops in El Roblar to all those who were interested. She was the first one to research about the grants provided by other international organizations and asked for the guidance from the specialists from UCA San Ramón to apply. She also kept working inside the community, encouraging and empowering women producers to join a cooperative and receive training that they could later on pass onto their children, spreading the knowledge.

#### 6.8. Property title delivery in El Roblar *January 2008*

With a rapid increase of cooperatives and organized groups of producers in the rural areas, the government noticed the need to speed up the property title process and start serving rural areas. Over 50 rural communities in the northern region of Nicaragua had

not been granted property titles, and even though the owners were recognized as such by the municipal government, farmers were starting to feel impatient with the process.

The National Government, ruled once again by Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista party, delivered public speeches on a regular basis. These speeches were the government's initiative to create a connection with the population. The content was based on the latest accomplishment of the government as well as political content that the ruling party wanted to announce. During these speeches it was normal to hear an updates on the property title of the lands.

Since the Sandinista party started ruling once again, the ministries suffered minor changes and part of this was the allocation of new ministry advocates. Brigades were deployed to the rural communities to accelerate the process that started with the Agrarian Reform. As a part of this the community of El Roblar was one of the main areas to be served, not only because of the increasing population and satisfying evolvement of the cooperative movement in the area but because of the high quality and quantity of the crops they produced.

The municipal government took part of the process by prioritizing themselves in the meetings held with the rest of the municipalities of the department. Among the ministries, the municipal government presented its case and provided the example of El Roblar to emphasize the need for legal procedures to be completed in the municipality (Arauz, 2015). This insistence on the matter took the municipality to the top of the list and was one of the first ones to be served according to the census performed in the year 2000.

In order to make the process easier and faster the community of El Roblar decided to pre-organize themselves and make a list of the landowners as well as a map of the division of lands they had so far. In this list they also marked which producers should be prioritized either according to age of the farmer or the amount of people living in that household. This organization proved to be helpful when the brigades showed the records and

explained that the previously made list in El Roblar had saved them 8 days worth of work. (Arauz, 2015)

Mayra Gámez participated as a facilitator in the process, helping out the women that were living alone and had no time to join the meetings. Women that had to work or take care of their children as well as women that were part of the cooperative El Privilegio and couldn't be part of the process delegated her to do the paperwork and being known around the municipality and by the government she was allowed to be one of the main characters of this process.

#### 6.9. Stem Rust affectation *April 2008*

With the legal permits finished, trainings having been held and regular workshops being promoted in the communities, the economic recovery of Nicaragua seemed to be going well. The country's main focus for its economic stability since the Sandinista government regained the power was agriculture. Being faithful to our roots, farmers were key stakeholders for the process and every ministry had one office dedicated to the relationship with the farmers, no matter the density of their production.

One of the strategies implemented by the government back in 1990 was the distribution of fast growing crops. As mentioned above, the main goal was to build self-sustainable communities and in order to do this these communities need to be fed. However, what Nicaraguans consider to be basic grains for their diet are not fast-growing crops; the fastest crop among the list was beans and this took a minimum of six months to be ready for a first harvest that because of its primary blooming is not loaded (Stillman, 2014).

Coffee's harvesting time depends on the type of grain that is being used; the variety that was regularly used in the country was *Arabica* with a harvesting time of three years. Since the need for this product was increasing and the country is known for its coffee production, the government distributed a different variety known as *Costa Rica 74* that had a harvesting time of only one and a half years and the costs for its management were lower.

The problem with this variety of coffee was its weakness and vulnerability to illnesses. One of these illnesses was the affectation of a fungus called Stem Rust that dries the plant from the leaves down and prevents the water and nutrients to reach the coffee beans. This fungus spreads easily inside the plant and within a month can kill over two hectares. This was the case with a Stem Rust plague that affected Nicaragua in 2008.

Coming from Honduras, Stem Rust reached the northern region of the country in April and the national government declared emergency situation for all coffee producers. A campaign to raise awareness was carried, and workshops on the management of this fungus were held in the communities. Chemical mixes that, while saving it, affected the plant's organic character composed the treatment for the fungus. The municipal office, trying to come up with a solution accepted by both national government and coffee producers, disclosed this information, alongside other data on the fungus and the possible effects of Stem Rust on a long-term situation.

As an effort to help, UCA San Ramón's experts developed organic pesticides to help prevent the propagation of the plague. These were distributed around the municipality but failed to satisfy the demand.

The communities took the matter to their own hands by working together to prevent further losses than the ones they already had. By the time the alert reached maximum category, over 50% of the lands in El Roblar were affected (UCA San Ramón, 2015). The cooperatives Daniel Teller and El Privilegio joined efforts and used the resources they had to treat plants suffering from Stem Rust, while those patches of land that were still safe were isolated from the rest and drained from water to make the plants stronger. (Gutierrez, 2015)

Both cooperatives agreed to reject the use of chemical pesticides in order to preserve the organic character of their product. This made it easier for the plague to spread in the

community and by the end of the year, once the alert was over, over 80% of the fields in El Roblar was lost over Stem Rust. The losses generated by this plague were irreversible.

#### 6.10. International Cooperation in El Roblar 2010

Two years after the devastation caused by the Stem Rust fungus, international community turned its eyes to Nicaragua for help. Economy suffered losses of up to 4.7% only on exportations and the country was suffering from power shortage and high costs of oil in the market. (Villagra, 2011). For the first time in history, International Organizations developed a plan alongside the United Nations in Nicaragua to start a process of recognition in the rural communities. (Alcaldía de Managua, 2014)

The United Nations Development Programme lead a series of day trips to the municipalities to acknowledge the different needs of each community. Aiming to direct donors to potential beneficiaries, the project tried to provide rural communities the opportunity to present themselves without intermediaries. Their costumes, the people, the products and the everyday needs of the communities as well as their goals for the future were all in the agenda and over 20 different organizations were part of it. (Lanuza, 2010)

The municipal government in San Ramón provided tours and small workshops in and with the communities, to introduce not only the organizations but also cooperatives and communities. Even though the work of UCA San Ramón had been fulfilling its objective of creating networks between communities and cooperatives, new groups were introduced during the project. Since the first meeting among cooperatives, new groups had emerged.

In El Roblar, the farmers were interested in presenting their entire situation to the organizations and departmental government, so they prepared presentations that included history, projects and goals. The directors of the cooperatives were selected by the community as the ones in charge to introduce the presentation to the audience as well as provide a tour around the farms.

Since some communities were too far away from Matagalpa and there was no hotel big enough to host all of the delegates from the project, the cooperatives Daniel Teller and El Privilegio worked together to develop an action plan. Inviting other groups from El Roblar, they hosted the delegates in their houses, creating plans for their stay that included time with the family and around their farms.

The offered tours around the coffee plantations, experiences with the coffee harvesting process and served a sample of their products to the delegates. The women in the cooperative El Privilegio were encouraged by Gámez to join the workshops as audio visitors and ask questions about the plans of the project. Gámez took the opportunity to go door to door around the members of her cooperative during the day tour and introduce them to the delegates, letting each member to tell her story and her expectations for the future. (Gámez, 2015)

#### 6.11. Crops Diversification law 2012

With the cooperation of international organizations, the work in the communities became easier. Not only they had financial support from organizations that specialized in agriculture, but also the opportunity to export their products grew. The production of beans replaced the production of coffee as the primary good in the community and corn was still being produced on a scale big enough to process it and turn it into cereals for the consumption of the municipality.

This change of focus was not enough to recover from the damage caused by the Stem Rust fungus and the government was forced to evaluate the situation. With a series of studies on the recovery period and economic implications of it, the national government, through the ministry of Economy, enacted a law that forced all farm owners to diversify their products.

Due to the affectation they projected an estimate of at least 10 years until the coffee plantations could fully recover from the damage and still after that period the quality of the beans wouldn't be the same. As a part of this initiative the ministry of agriculture



changed the coffee variety to one that was stronger and less prone to be affected by plagues. The economic implications of this change were higher than expected but projecting themselves under a 10-year context, they decided that the change was feasible. (MAGFOR, 2014)

Taking into account the economic situation of rural communities, the government dropped the idea of letting them face the costs of diversification on their own. Instead of that, and in the case of San Ramón, the municipal government joined efforts with UCA San Ramón to distribute the new coffee variety and seeds for fruits and vegetable plants to the communities.

Inside El Roblar, the cooperative El Privilegio started to produce whole-wheat cereals to subsist during this period. With the help of the international organizations that visited the community in the project sponsored by UNDP, they obtained the funds to start a coffee roaster. Sons and daughters from the members of the cooperative that were studying or had graduated as engineers and agronomists designed the structure and drafted the expenses that this project entailed.

The goal of the cooperative was to be able to sell their coffee fully processed instead of selling parchment bean<sup>2</sup>. While the coffee plantation was growing, the cooperative would rent the roaster to those in the community that needed it for commercial and personal use. The funds from this activity would go directly to the cooperative and lower the amount of input that each member needed to give every month.

While the coffee and the roaster were growing, Gámez proposed an initiative to the rest of the women to start growing red beans again, as well as corn and wheat in order to produce multi-grain cereals and sell them locally. Since the members lost a total of 90% of their lands to the plague, they had no source of income high enough to maintain the cooperative and their families. Coffee was selected as the primary product not only

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<sup>2</sup> Coffee bean that is still raw and unprocessed; called parchment because of the thin Shell that the bean has, similar to parchment paper.

because of its high demand in the municipality but because of how often people drink it, as for multi-grain cereals (which are seen as main product for the Nicaraguan diet) they are taken only once or twice a day.

Following the law established by the government, the cooperative started to grow red beans, wheat and corn. They followed through with the project of the roaster and managed to finish it in 2013. Once the roaster was built they all pitched in for the production of multi-grain cereals and the plan gave good results, increasing the cooperative's income by 26% within the first month. (Gámez, 2015)

#### 6.12. Legal ratification of Cooperatives 2014

By the year 2014 San Ramón had almost completely recover from the effects of both Stem Rust and the revolution. The country's economy was stable and Nicaragua was no longer suffering power shortage or supply regulation. Literacy rate was almost 100% in both rural and urban areas and health and education brigades were deployed around the country on a regular basis to prevent crisis and educate the population. (Alcaldía de Managua, 2014)

Work was still to be done inside the municipalities. With the help of UCA San Ramón, the local government started recognized legally all the coffee cooperatives in San Ramón, performing for the first time a second census to evaluate the situation and give the opportunity to all those groups that were still not legally recognized, to finish the paperwork required by the ministries.

At the same time, financial aid was provided to those cooperatives and groups that were still suffering from the plague. Communities that had farms without a fully restored coffee field after the affectation of Stem Rust were given packages of a variety of seeds to grow in their lands. The resources needed for the managing of those lands that had already been planted were also provided to the communities.

Within a period of three months all groups in San Ramón were legally registered as communities and were granted the right to access municipal funds for trainings and workshops. They were given access to the network database of stakeholders in the development process of the municipality and taken into account in the upcoming projects of it. (Arauz, 2015)

For the cooperative El Privilegio, this year marked the beginning of a different project. With a growing demand for ecotourism in the municipality and the disposition of UCA San Ramón in the process, the cooperative enrolled in the guesthouse program. This program was first developed for the urban area of the municipality and those guests that were interested in visiting rural communities were scheduled for one-day trips.

The involvement in these guesthouse programs gave the cooperative the opportunity to present their day-by-day lives to a whole new sector. Tourists and possible investors visited the houses of the members and worked with them in the field, learning from a first hand basis the reality of the producers, their history and their goals for a future. The members involved all their families in the process; daughters, sons and husbands were part of the guesthouse. The family taught the tourist not only about the harvesting of coffee and other crops but about the struggles they had been through and the reasons why they kept going.

One of the common activities in the guesthouses was a meeting with the rest of the members of the cooperatives in the communal house to share a cup of coffee produced by them. Tourists harvested the coffee beans and with the roaster (image 8) working the women prepared and grounded coffee to be served alongside a dish of *rosquillas*<sup>3</sup>, which were made out the corn they grew. (Gámez, 2015)

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<sup>3</sup> Nicaraguan typical biscuits

### 6.13. Marketing of coffee “El Privilegio” 2015

With the development of the guesthouses and the recovery from the Stem Rust consequences, the cooperative found encouragement in the tourists. Foreigners started to approach UCA San Ramón asking for a bag of coffee produced in El Roblar. Those that had been a part of the guesthouse experience in the community were fascinated by the taste of the coffee and were eager to bring some home.

**Image 8: Roasting Machine**



Machine used for the coffee grain peeling and roasting in the cooperative.  
Source: the author, 2015

Hearing about this, the cooperative decided it was time to stop selling their coffee on a local basis and Gámez made the inquiries in the municipality to find out about the requirements to sell national. The legal part of the process had to be done in the capital city, since the offices had no branches in Matagalpa. Deciding that it was worth the try, the women in the cooperative collected money to send Gámez and two other delegates to the capital and bring back all the forms required for the process.

Once in Managua, Gámez signed as the legal representative of the cooperative in the ministry of agriculture and commerce. She figured, they were compelled by the law to pay for the procedure and the process took longer than they expected. Returning to El Roblar empty handed was “not easy”, she felt as if everything was lost; the procedures had a high cost and she would have to travel on a weekly basis to Managua. (Gámez, 2015)

UCA San Ramón extended its support to the process and provided the cooperative the funds to pay for the legal procedures as well as transportation for the delegates to the capital city. Prior to the process, they held a workshop in the community with the members of the cooperative to explain the length of the process, the possible outcomes and the requirements it had. Having agreed all the members to the implications, they went through with it and started the legal paperwork in January 2015. (UCA San Ramón, 2015)

It came as a surprise to everyone that the municipal government, who talked with the institutions in charge of the process to accelerate it, supported the idea. With them by their side it would take only five months to finish the procedures and grant the license to distribute on a national level, as well as the copyrights for the brand “El Privilegio” and the logo.

A month after the paperwork was done, Gámez was called to the capital city once again, requested to bring all the certificated of the cooperative and another letter signed by all the members that gave her the permission to act as the legal representative. She was told that the brand “El Privilegio” was already registered, they could remain under that name, as a cooperative but the coffee should have to be named differently, forcing them to change the logo as well.

Defeated, she returned to El Roblar to explain the situation to the members of the cooperative and proposed an extraordinary meeting to find a solution (Gámez, 2015). After several hours of brainstorming the members decided to use the name of the area

where their community was located: “Yasica”; a young native women that fought with the bowmen against the imperialist soldiers. The logo was not going to be defined until they were assured the name was available, but they still kept brainstorming on ideas for it.

Gámez returned once again to Managua with the other two delegates and a member from UCA San Ramón and asked the ministry to check for the availability of the name. After three hours of wait they were told there was no brand under that name and the procedure went through. Again the municipality called the ministry to push the process; the involvement of this office was key for the branding, it eased the process and gave the cooperative the empowerment they needed. (Arauz, 2015)

In November 2015 the process was officially finished and the cooperative “El Privilegio” was the first one to own a coffee brand with the permission to be sold on a national level. Since the government’s strategy to fight poverty was based on tourism, the municipality designated part of its budget to the construction of a coffee shop in San Ramón where local products were sold. Women and men from El Roblar were trained as baristas and other received cooking classes to organize a menu.

The coffee shop “Cafetería Monte Grande” opened in February 2016 in the center of the urban area. It offers both raw and prepared coffee as well as food and crafts from the community. This is the first of many projects El Roblar hopes to push through.

## **VII. La Garita- Guesthouses**

### 7.1. 1979-1989 Sandinista Revolution

After the Somoza dictatorship granted foreigners 42% of the country's area in property lands to keep them satisfied, San Ramón set itself up to welcome its new inhabitants. The municipal government started the construction of the first Catholic Church in town and the allocation of this church was also to determine the new municipal division. Under the complaint of many foreigners, San Ramón had to reallocate all its governmental offices and resources to one single community and centralize the municipality.

In the past, there was no centralization, people had to assist different municipalities for each activity. For example, the municipal office was in the community Santa Emilia and the central office of the National Guard was the community Ocalca. However, due to disposition of land and a greater concentration of the population, the Catholic Church was built in a community called "La Garita" and in 1970 this community was officially named the capital community in the municipality of San Ramón and all governmental and central offices were moved. (Tinoco, Historia de San Ramón, 2015)

The centralization of all activities made the process of controlling the rebels fighting against the regime easier. The National Guard allocated all its officers in La Garita and they were later deployed to other communities depending on the amount of revolutionaries living there. The same thing happened with the inhabitants of San Ramón that were not participating in the revolution, a vast majority moved to La Garita, knowing that there was no war to be held near the Catholic Church.

During the Revolution the international community had to make key decisions that would affect the country; they would either choose a side during the war or they had to withdraw their delegates and close relations with the country until it gained political stability once again. Being too dangerous for its delegates to remain in the country and having witnessed murders of foreigners in the country, 70% of the international community withdraws itself from Nicaraguan territory and the remaining 30% stayed

providing financial and armament support to the contra-revolutionaries. (Gilles Bataillon, 1998)

On the other hand, the national government deployed officers from the National Guard to fight the revolutionaries with the support of both national and international teams of the military corps. The operation apprehended every person against the regime. Those that showed signs of being a part (present or past) of the revolution were immediately apprehended and executed under the orders of Somoza (Borge, 2012).

To prove its loyalty to the ruling party, the Somoza dictatorship, each municipality in the country had different ways of supporting the fight against contra revolutionaries. In the case of San Ramón, the municipal government promoted a law, effecting only on a local basis, to provide asylum to all those officers from the National Guard that needed a place to stay during the war. On an equal matter, it encouraged families in San Ramón to turn in revolutionaries in exchange for “security”. (Gilles Bataillon, 1998)

As an internal law, the municipality was to follow all the orders coming from the national government. The Catholic Church was one of the institutions that were not ruled by the government, however its actions were regulated under the system. The municipal government was to supervise every activity performed by and in the church (Bravo, 1998). However, in small communities of San Ramón the church still managed to support the revolutionaries; the church in La Garita worked as a decoy to keep attention out of the eyes of the activities the church performed in the communities. (Arauz, 2015)

Having a clear division between both sides of the war, the communities started to participate actively in the process. Rural areas such as El Roblar, Yucul or others fought actively in the war against Somoza, while other less inhabited communities Hilapo, Tapasle and Ocalca remained inactive, following the orders of the municipal government. The population in la Garita had to make a decision that was harder than in other communities, due to the amount of governmental activity performed in the area.



When the war started to escalate, the population divided itself into two groups: one group supported the National Guard and young men and women enrolled in the military. Families that had strong relations with foreigners and high commands of the National Guard formed this group of people, they were promised security in exchange for support. The other group joined the Sandinistas and fights in the revolution as part of the small *guerrillas*<sup>4</sup>. This group, with a large 80% of the population, was formed by young and determined people that, encouraged by the messaged of Sandino and Daniel Ortega, fled to the mountains to fight. (Borge, 2012)

Back in 1980s Nicaragua still had reserved opinions about the participation of women in the war, and even though they were accepted to fight along, wives with children were encouraged to stay put for their own safety. This was the case of a young Margarita Sánchez; with only 30 years old she was married and had two children. A strong believer in the Catholic Church, Margarita wanted to be involve in any way, supporting the rest of the families that were left behind and affected by the progress of the revolution.

Margarita was a part of a group of women her same age that gathered every day in the church to pray for the country. In one of those meetings they decided that it was needed to spread their faith in the other communities of the municipality and with the support of the priest in charge of the church, they made daily trips to the communities to teach religion and open praying circles with all those that were interested. (Sánchez, 2015)

As a part of its mission in the country, the Catholic Church received religious brigades of nuns and priests that were eager to adopt social causes and work for it. One of these brigades brought Lourdes Camargo, a Brazilian nun from the order of Saint Teresa. Camargo's brigade was scheduled to work with the Ministry of Health, bringing vitamins to children in the communities. Performing daily visits to the rural areas, Camargo realized that the biggest problem these communities had was the malnutrition of children in rural areas.

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<sup>4</sup> In this context the term is used to describe small groups of irregular soldiers that used handmade warfare to fight the enemy.

She teamed up with Margarita and they started a project to help these kids and their parents. With the country under a poor economic situation, Camargo and Sánchez asked for help from those they knew could provide medicine or human resources. While doing this, they recruit a Cuban doctor called Elena Martínez to ask for her help weighting the children and diagnosing their level of malnutrition. Once they had this information it was going to be easier to know whom they should prioritize and what type of medication they would need.

One of the solutions Camargo found was the use of medicinal plants that due to the fertile soil in San Ramón were easy to grow. The nun told the rest of the women that were previously working under the group named “Christian based Community” she had an action plan and it required them to be committed to the cause. Margarita, who at the time was working for a bakery owned by the municipality, quit her job and dedicated herself to assist this activity. The church provided a small financial reward to those who were helping the brigade full time.

Camargo and the 12 ladies that made-up the group asked for advice from a friend of hers that knew how to work with soybeans. They were taught about the use of soy for a better nutrition as well as medicinal plants to treat different diseases. The group decided to go around the communities once again and teach parents how to use these plant, grow them in their own household and the use of soy as a supplement.

The problem they were facing was the lack of a stable space to gather and provide workshops as well as cooking the soy and making products ready to consume. They started to meet in public areas such as parks, borrowing small stoves from people around the area and cooking with wood. Mothers would come from rural areas to La Garita to learn about the process and receive products that were donated to them as well as free health checkups from Dr. Martínez.

In one of their meetings, the bishop in charge of dioceses of San Ramón spotted them and asked about their project. Since they were not working in a non-profit project, he offered to help them. After a meeting with Margarita and sister Camargo they decided that he was going to raise money and buy a house for them to establish a proper office for the center. The only request he had was for them to keep working alongside the communities and not charge them for any of the services they offered.

Months later, they talked to one of the landowners in La Garita and he agreed to sell a house to them with the rest of property that was not yet urbanized (image 9). With the help of the bishop and donors from Managua, they purchased the land and settled as the “Casa del Niño”<sup>5</sup> due to their focus on children. The Ministry of Health recognized them as partners and since they were not able to provide service to all the communities and the amount of patience, they redirected all children under 15 to their facilities.

**Image 9: La Casa del Niño**



La Casa del Niño in 2014  
Source: Alcaldía de San Ramón, 2014

Every 8 days they went to the communities doing house visits to those families that weren't able to go to La Garita. Realizing, however, that the work was too much for them, they started to train delegates in each community. Instead of visiting the communities once a week, they left the delegates to organize their communities and pass on the information and they provided follow-up once a month along with volunteer doctors.

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<sup>5</sup> House of the kid.- Spanish translation

The “Casa del Niño” reached a point where they would have up to 25 children waiting to be examined in one day. Having so many children they realized it was too hard to keep them calmed and started to develop activities to distract them. As mothers would be examined, since they provided integer health checkups to both mother and children, the kids would be in a room painting and doing crafts. This new dynamic caught the attention of art teachers that later on allied with the center to evolve into a more dynamic grassroots organization. (Sánchez, 2015)

In the meantime, the revolution was developing in the communities and other municipalities. In San Ramón, families that lived in La Garita were concerned about those in the rural areas fighting against Somoza. According to the municipality records, 25% of those that left never came back. (Alcaldía de San Ramón, 2013) In 1989 the revolution announced its triumph and those that were still alive went back to their homes looking for their families.

By then, international communities had withdrawn from national territory at its most, waiting until the country recovered its stability. Those that were supporting the Somoza government left the country the same day he did while others fled the country asking for political asylum in South America, Costa Rica and Miami.

In the meantime Nicaragua was left under the supervision of those that led the revolution and after the first democratic electoral process in years Daniel Ortega was named president. (Bravo, 1998)

## 7.2. Scholarships and relationship between Cuba and Nicaragua 1989-1993

In an effort to reconstruct the country and promote education, the national government started a campaign to fight illiteracy. As an incentive to those students that stayed in school during the revolution and to promote higher education, the government announced an agreement with the Cuban government focusing on the fields of engineering and medicine.

Since this agreement was intended for students with high overall GPA and lack of financial resources, the national government order municipalities to start a screening among their students. Each municipality should designate one student per school to perform special exams in the capital municipality of the department. In each exam students were to be tested in mathematics, geography, history, science and physics. With a total of 8 exams in one week, students were given study guides to prepare themselves a month before.

In San Ramón the municipal government called the authorities in the high school to apply with its best students. Since there was only one high school serving the whole municipality and it was located in La Garita, 90% of the student body lived in that same community. Among them was Ivania Zeledón (image 10). Ivania had moved to San Ramón during the war with her mother who became a widow after the National Guard killed her husband.

Ivania was an avid reader and loved to study; her favorite subjects were math and chemistry. Being an orphan at an early age, she had to help her mother take care of the rest of her siblings. She was the only female in a family of four brothers. Her brothers were recruited by the FSLN to join the military and perform special operations arresting the remaining guards from Somoza's army. (Zeledón, 2015)

**Image 10: Ivania Zeledón**



Ivania in her guest-room.  
Source: San Ramón municipality, 2014

Being in her last year of college, Ivania was excited to go to the university in Matagalpa once the war was over. She recalls telling her mother “I’m done now, I can go to Matagalpa and study to become a professional and earn some money for us”, but her mother replied she had no money to send her to Matagalpa so this was her final year studying, she would have to dedicate her life to working in one of the small stores in San Ramón. (Zeledón, 2015)

One month before her high school graduation Ivania received a call from the principal’s office telling her she had to go to a meeting in the municipal office. The moment she arrived in the office she realized there was nobody but her from her school and started guessing if there was a problem with her exams. Municipal office did not tell the students about the screening for the scholarships.

Ivania remembers the exact moment the principal told her about the scholarship and how she felt it was a joke. The principal told her there was a scholarship being offered to the best students in the country so they had a process of screening that started on a municipal basis to later on be tested on a department level and finally national level in Managua.

Ivania went back home to let her mother know about the offer, asking her support to accept the proposal and test her skills in the exams in Matagalpa the following week.

Leaving her house implied she had to quit her family for the following 8 years, the scholarship was a particular program that included specialization and high school studies completion, taking into account the low educational level Nicaragua was offering back then. Ivania's mother told her it was her final decision but she had to remember she had no money to support her in case she needed financial support in Cuba.

Taking that into account and prioritizing her desire to study, Ivania accepted and was the only student from San Ramón to travel to Matagalpa and perform the exams. After a week of exams she was notified that her score was the highest in the department of Matagalpa and needed to leave to Managua that same day. Ivania had no chance to see her family before she left, she called her mother and told her the news moments before she got in the bus and left to Managua. (Zeledón, 2015)

Once in Managua she met several other students that were also granted the scholarship. Among those students were sons and daughters of high rank generals from the revolution. They were all housed in the same place for almost a week and one night during dinner people from the ministry of education told them they were leaving to Cuba that same night. Meetings like that were usual, more than 100 students moved to Cuba for professional studies which were distributed between medicine and engineering.

In the case of Ivania, she started studying a week after she arrived. She still remembers the classes and the work she had to do. During daytime she had to attend high school to catch up with her studies and equal the educational level provided in Cuba and during nighttime she went to the university where she immediately put into practice what she just learned in school. Since her average was amongst the highest she was selected to be part of the group to specialize in hydraulic engineering.

### 7.3. Reconstruction process 1991-1995

One of the implications the revolution process left was the need to reconstruct major municipalities where the National Guard had affected infrastructure. Even though San Ramón is not an urban municipality it faced damage in pavement streets as well as public areas and some private houses taken by the National Guard.

The national government issued an order to all municipalities to create reconstruction plans. These plans had to go hand-to-hand with their annual budget. It is national law that implies the need of a budget per municipality. Each municipality has to pass the budget to the departmental government, which gets the approval from the national government. Since this was a post-war budget the work was done together with departmental government.

San Ramón had to change many of its previous infrastructures, however the general location of communal areas and historic building remained the same. Since one of the orders from the national government was to prioritize these structures the municipality worked according to these previous locations. The cathedral worked as the limit between La Garita and the next community and the municipal office was located in the center of the town alongside the courtroom and a public park.

The municipal government was given the task to design a reconstruction plan according to the previously stated orders. In order to work in an organized schedule, they started working on a census in La Garita, with the goal of dividing the municipality's land lots again. Since the revolution many people had moved to Matagalpa, Managua and other big municipalities and the amount of houses left abandoned in the community overpassed 50%. (Alcaldía de San Ramón, 2013)

The municipal office also needed to allocate those brigades that were coming on behalf of the international community to work with the community in its reconstruction and as part of the new programs established by the government. The internal work of the community



was a key part of this process, the community worked together in order to create a list of all those areas that needed to be prioritized and those that had some historic or cultural value and were too important to be demolished or relocated.

One of those areas was for example the church. Using the knowledge of people from La Garita and people from another community called Monte Grande, they passed a document to the municipality that forbids the relocation of the cathedral. The main reason behind this was the discovery of goldmines underneath it. In Monte Grande one of the most famous goldmines was opened years before the revolution, and while doing empirical studies on the mine and tracking the areas where gold was located the miners discovered that it went all the way to the area where the cathedral was built. (Molina, 2015)

Knowing that the national government passed a law that forced the municipal government to include them in the reconstruction process they exposed all of their needs to the municipal office and asked them to make a budget for the repairs and count the municipality as the main workforce for this. (Alcaldía de San Ramón, 2013)

Trying to do their part in this process the “Casa del Nino” changed its name to “Centro Promocional Cristiano por la Paz y la Vida”<sup>6</sup> (CPCPV). The reason behind the new name was the incorporation of other disciplines that would help La Garita recover its cultural values and roots. They started providing the population with art classes, music classes and instead of only teaching women how to use medicinal plants and cook with soy, they established a small apothecary that sells prepared pills and syrups made out of medicinal plants.

The CPCPV opened a small clinic where they hosted radiologists, pediatricians, gynecologists and internists on a weekly basis. The consultations in the clinic were completely free of charge and people from all over the municipality came to visit them.

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<sup>6</sup> Spanish for: Christian Promotional Center for Peace and Life

Having set up the CPCPV as a whole organization, the religious partners withdraw their participation and left the community to develop by themselves.

In this process, Margarita was designated as the director of the organization and with the rest of the ladies that were part of it since the beginning came to organize many workshops. At the same time, they promoted the art of their students by selling them in local fairs and incentivizing them to pursue their studies in art or crafts. However, Margarita realized that the problem was not the lack of art programs, but the lack of hotels to welcome foreign brigades.

In 1993 Nicaragua had an average of 5 brigades coming every month to help in different development related projects. Rural communities such as San Ramón were the targets of many organizations eager to make a change in the country. The only problem was that there were no accommodations for the in the municipality. Even today, San Ramón has a limited amount of hotels, only two in the urban area, and their price is too high for brigades to include in their budget. Seeking for a solution to this problem, Margarita decided to gather women from La Garita and arrange a meeting with one of the delegates from the brigades to ask for their support.

During this meeting Ivania and Margarita became acquaintances and they were selected as main characters in the implementation process of this new project. The brigade's delegate told them, they could host foreigners in their own homes, and there was no need for special treatment or special accommodations. One of the goals for this method was to present to the brigades the day-by-day of people from San Ramón. They were invited to learn how to cook typical food and learn the language from people inside the communities.

A different approach to the hotels, guesthouses was the key to San Ramón's development in La Garita. Ivania was part of the first group of women that hosted foreigners in their homes. Her house was small and she had just two rooms, one living room and outdoor

kitchen made out of wood and zinc sheets. At first she didn't think she had the conditions to host a guest, less alone one that didn't speak Spanish.

Part of the plan was to introduce these foreigners to the lifestyle of people from rural communities. By doing so they would allow an exchange more complete between both rural and international community. The costumes that the people in rural communities had and the way they were living and recovering themselves after the damage caused by the war was of significant importance for the country. The government aimed to present this situation to gather not only more international cooperation but to gain understanding as to which programs had to be implemented and where. (Alcaldía de San Ramón, 2013)

Since the organization in charge of supervising these programs was going to be the CPCPV, Margarita created a chart to specify the mission and vision of it that included these guesthouses; together with Ivania and the sister communities of North Carolina the co-created the sister communities of San Ramón. The guesthouses were part of a definitive tourism agency created by this group, one that would later be named ADETOURS.

In the meantime, Ivania was finishing her studies and returned to Nicaragua to help her mother reconstruct their home. She then realized her family had summarized to only two people, her and her mother. Both of Mayra's brothers passed away during the war and her father moved to the United States looking for a job. Ivania started working in the capital city but felt uncomfortable with the people that didn't have the same costumes as she did, plus weather was warmer and it was making it hard for her to work comfortably. She quit her job in Managua and asked for a transfer to Matagalpa or San Ramon.

In 1992 she was named the executive secretary for the director of ENACAL (National Company for Water Supply and Sewerage). She was then working and helping her mother in everything she could. Thanks to her high performance at work and will to learn and work with other people Ivania was offered another scholarship to finish her masters

in Canada. After a minor dispute with her boss, she had to reject the scholarship and stay in San Ramón.

This inconvenient discouraged Ivania and left her feeling not only uncomfortable but also unhappy in her workplace (Zeledón, 2015). She decided to dedicate herself to teaching and started working in the local high school. Ivania started teaching math and physics to high school students.

Two years into her work as a teacher Ivania was diagnosed with arthritis and advised by the doctors to stay at home and rest. She was first given a month of subsidy with medication and therapy. Even though she recovered from the pain, the illness still wouldn't let her feel comfortable enough to spend the entire day standing and reaching to a chalkboard.

Being known by the authorities in the ministry of education, they decided to let her take some time off teaching duties. Since she was a key part of her family's income she could not stop working so in 1993 they decided to designate her as the director of 43 preschools. All of the preschools were located in San Ramón; Ivania had her office in one center near her house and gathered the directors of each preschool on a weekly basis.

Since she was a little girl, Ivania had talent in theatrical arts. Performing as a dancer representing Nicaragua while she was in Cuba and even while studying her high school in Nicaragua, she was one of the main dancers for the departmental folklore group. This lead Ivania to incorporate dancing and art in the preschools, believing this to be helpful in the social development of children and inculcating them the appreciation towards art since an early age.

One year after Ivania was working with the different preschools, the government decided to push the reconstruction process up to speed. For one year they designated part of their budget just for the reconstruction and renovation of streets and parks. They also planned

for the construction of a brand new bridge that connected both sides of the municipality, making it safer for kids to cross the street in the morning on their way to school.

Foreseeing the need for foreign investment in the municipality, they kept part of their annual budgets designated for maintenance of these roads. At the same time, a special office was created, in charge of projects, imitating the structure of the municipality in Matagalpa. This office was the one to propose and carry projects such as the renovation of the central park, the renovation of the municipal offices and the construction of an inclusive education room in the high school, built using funds donated by one of the NGOs that came to San Ramón after the revolution.

Since most of the town was under reconstruction, students were finding it hard to go to school; roads were closed and public transportation was very limited. Besides that, small children were in danger due to the amount of machines working all at once and their parents decided to take them out of school. This inspired Ivania to start homeschooling those children who were not able to go to school or those that could only go half of the day.

She left her work in the preschools and taught and opened a small space in her house to teach kids that were not going to school. She first helped those that needed guidance or tutoring with math classes or to pass the admissions exam to the university, but as time went by more and more parents trusted her with their children and by the end of the year she had over 50 students.

#### 7.4. La Garita: Centralized government branch office 2000-2002

As a key part of the reconstruction process, the government needed to designate one community as the capital community in San Ramón. The odds for any other community, instead of La Garita, to be selected as such were very narrow. During the whole reconstruction process that had been the mindset of the architects, centralizing everything in one single place in order for them to be able to localize governmental institutions when needed.

The constitution of the country aimed for a secular education and secular country, granting everyone liberty of thought and expression. However, the Catholic Church had a wide range of power in the decisions of the government. So the location of the Catholic Church (image 11) in San Ramón turned into a reason behind the designation of La Garita as the capital municipality.

**Image 11: Catholic Church in San Ramón**



Church of San Ramón  
Source: the author, 2015

There was still one more reason behind the designation of La Garita and that was the geographical position of the community. Although it would be logic to think the designation of a community located in the center of the municipality as the capital community, for those that were part of the government logic worked differently (Arauz, 2015). They needed a community that was close enough to Matagalpa to be able to reach the departmental offices anytime it was needed but also one community that was centric enough to be able to have connection with the rest of the municipality. This made La Garita the best option, meeting all the requirements.

This new municipal order also implied some changes for the CPCPV; the government decided to restructure all the community boundaries and some communities were bigger than they were before. Following their initiative to be organized and bring help to the whole community as much as needed, they created commissions, one in each community. Margarita and the rest of the board of directors delegated two people responsible for each

community. These people would make visits to the communities and provide medications and health checkups, keeping records of each patient and their progress.

On the other hand, the CPCPV had to finish their guesthouse project. The first visit had proof to be a success, even today, over 10 years later; Ivania still keeps communication with her first guests. (Zeledón, 2015) But in order for the program to be successful and bring something to the community as well as highlight the culture and history of San Ramon, they needed to define the role of these guesthouses and the tour agency, as well as decide a name for it.

The initial plan involved a series of activities promoted by the people in the community, including walking tours around La Garita and some others in nearby communities. Ivania told Margarita that La Garita on its own was a very small community and there was no point in making walking tours there. However, they could unify the municipality if they invited people from different communities to offer walking tours and agricultural demonstrations and expositions to the foreigners. That means La Garita would focus merely on the guesthouses and creating a connection between the guest and the families.

#### 7.5. ADETOURS and the Guesthouse programs 2002-2008

The creation of the guesthouses was going to open new opportunities to San Ramon. Offering a full rural-Nicaragua immersion to those officers from NGOs that came to help the community served as part of the counterpart for development projects. Being the first time this happened in the country, other municipalities that were implementing such project were also doing it each on their own way, which made it hard to establish one guideline that could fit all of the communities in Nicaragua.

One of the ways that the CPCPV found to solve the guideline problem and strengthen the community was to involve both sides of the initiative, rural and organizational. Margarita and Ivania became the directive of the new tour operator that would be in charge of these programs. The chosen name was ADETOURS honoring the name of one of the main implementers of the project, Adela. Filling all the legal procedures and meeting the

requirements that the government instated for micro-enterprises ADETOURS was born in 2002 and started running officially with its first program: guesthouses with cultural immersion on Nicaragua's costumes and food.

The guesthouses provided the foreigners the opportunity to experience the reality of everyday life in rural communities of Nicaragua. Not only were they able to stay in a house that wasn't changed in order to fill the requirements of a five star hotel, but also they were able to interact with the family. In the case of Ivania she recalls teaching her guest how to cook Nicaraguan *gallopinto*<sup>7</sup> as well as other typical dishes and in the process of cooking she shares her story with them. By doing so, her guest felt included in the family and not only close to Ivania.

The involvement of the whole family is key for the guesthouse to work. Ivania says that the conversations during dinner were always guided by her guest, she was the one that asked everything she wanted to know and her husband, children and her tried to explain her the situation as well as incorporate elements from the life in San Ramón that could interest her, making it attractive to her to visit the places they talked about and described.

At the end of the homestay program in her guesthouse Ivania felt accomplished, to have been able to communicate with her guest ignoring language barriers and her own shyness. At first she felt as if her house was not adequate to host anyone, it was very small; she didn't have enough money to buy food that *gringos*<sup>8</sup> were used to. However her guest gave her a positive response that she felt eager to invite other people in the municipality to participate in the activity.

At first it would be hard; culture in rural communities of Nicaragua is not habituated to have strangers in the households, less alone foreigners. At the same time, women were used to stay at home, raise their children and have everything ready by the time the husband came back from work, women were (and in some parts still are) seen as

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<sup>7</sup> Typical food made out of the mix of rice and red beans stir fry with salt and onion.

<sup>8</sup> Latinamerican slang used to name a person born or raised in the United States of America



dependents on their husbands. The idea of them being the host for a foreigner that came on behalf of an NGO was too hard to break, so Ivania proposed a pilot program with people from San Ramón, including those that had already been guesthouses, to provide feedback and general ideas on what to expect.

After long consideration, over 10 women agreed to the program and breaking barriers the first training for guesthouses was implemented. They had several questions and obstacles at the beginning but it was easy for them to get used to the idea of having a guest in their houses. Families opened their homes to foreigners with the goal of providing a service that ultimately would serve the community.

One year later and in an attempt to get involve in the initiative, the municipality decided to support the guesthouses. They not only provided trainings in special cooking, Nicaraguan culture and hospitality but also a small grant to those families that were decided to get involved in the program and needed to adapt the room where guests would be welcomed. At the same time, and by orders of the national government a different project was being launched in San Ramón.

In 2004 the national government changed its economic strategy into one less complex. Since coffee was still undergoing the effects of stem rust, they needed to find a different focus to lift the economy and stabilize it. Since Nicaragua is filled with historic events such as the revolution, wars between natives and Spanish colonizers and the battle between native beliefs and catholic and Christian teachings, as well as diverse culture from the pacific to the Caribbean, tourism seemed to be the best idea.

Even though it was not a settled idea nor was it mandatory, the municipal government of San Ramón prepared its own strategy to join to this new system. The first action was to promote San Ramón on a departmental basis, as a tourism destination for historic tourism and eco-tourism. They not only highlighted the coffee fields and diversity of flora and fauna in virgin forests, but the newly offered experience of the guesthouses.

In the meantime, and to allow ADETOURS to organize itself and work solely on the guesthouses and invitation to more participants, CPCPV took charge of activities that ADETOURS couldn't. The walking programs, the teaching of cultural dances and arts as well as training on etiquette and cooking classes were now part of the work that CPCPV did. The organization never lost, nor has it lost so far, its focus on education specialized in natural medicine for children and teenagers, but it was certainly diversified due to the implementation of the guesthouses.

ADETOURS, under the direction of Margarita and Ivania made a list of all those families that were interested or already part of the guesthouses. At the same time they finished all the legal formalities they needed to create a tour agency, as stated by the government. Part of this paperwork was the designation of one single person as the legal representative of the agency and since Margarita had to work with CPCPV, Ivania was designated as the director of ADETOURS. However, since the agency's offer did not limit itself to guesthouses, Ivania decided to create different divisions, focusing on rural tourism and guesthouses was hers and those activities related to small workshops on handcrafted products and music and dance courses were under the direction of someone else.

The initiative of guesthouses, as previously stated, developed in Nicaragua on a parallel basis in other rural communities. Small communities in Ometepe Island, Rivas, León, Matagalpa, Masaya, San Juan River (border with Costa Rica) and the Caribbean Coast also created their own guesthouse divisions. To make this service constant all over the country and reduce the differences between each municipality, the municipal government of San Ramón created a network between the guesthouses they had and those in other municipalities. They exchanged names and contact information of those people leading the initiative.

With the guesthouses already instated and accepted by the government, the CPCPV collaborated in the project only as an external supervisor. Since they had been working for a longer period of time, this organization had already established networks with NGOs interested in taking part of the initiative as clients. Therefore, with the support of

such organizations, they asked for financial support to encourage those families that wanted to join and felt as if the lack of financial resources was an obstacle. Providing grants to these families helped create small spaces in their own homes to host guests, without changing the structure of the house by itself.

Having the support of the municipal government gave Ivania the opportunity to create a relationship between the guesthouses of San Ramon and those in other communities. Together with the directors of other guesthouses Ivania created the first ever exchange of experiences between guesthouses in Nicaragua. She prepared all the needs that the participants would have, being all women she arranged for them to stay in the houses of the host community and learn from a first side perspective how to run a guesthouse according to everyone's daily life.

At the same time the participants provided information about the activities they hosted in their own homes and how they prepared the room for the guest, the food, the involvement of the family and the community as well as cultural activities. The goal of this exchange was not only to create a consistency among the guesthouses but also to implement different initiatives in their own programs. Those activities that seemed to be successful among them, from the guest perspective, were to be implemented as main activities for a guesthouse in the country; cooking classes, narrating the history of the community from a personal perspective and inclusive cultural activities were selected as the main ones.

#### 7.6. Historic-tourism in San Ramón and cultural implications 2009-2010

Having initiated initiatives as the guesthouses and walking tours around communities, Nicaragua was including all members of its society into the developing progress. Rural communities, that until then had been neglected and underestimated, started to act like key stakeholders for the implementation of development initiatives. The basis of such initiatives was the resources that the communities had, without changing the natural environment and culture of each one of them.

Highlighting the life of rural people in Nicaragua was sure to be a different approach from the one previously used in the matter of tourism. Until 2009 Nicaragua had been advertising itself as a land filled with beaches and tropical weather. The exclusion of rural communities was a way to prevent tourists from noticing the reality of the third world. As it was, Managua had enough poverty in its streets to advertise the “*undeveloped*” communities. The key for change was identifying the difference between poor and rural.

It is true that most, if not all, rural communities in Nicaragua have few financial resources; this doesn’t characterize rural communities as poor. The amount of natural, cultural and human resources that these communities have makes them interesting and turns them into a place where tourism can easily be implemented. There is no direct link between poverty and rural communities, even though they can often be seen in the same situation.

Nicaragua took advantage of the diversity its rural communities present and in 2009 the Institute of Tourism conducted a broad study in rural communities. Examining the situation of each community and what they could offer if rural tourism were to be implemented. According to a report written by Sergio Zapata and Roberto Baca for the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism, they were not expecting rural tourism to be implemented in some communities already. (Zapata & Baca, 2009)

In May 2009, with the Millennium Development Goals absent from rural communities, the government decided to use the rural communities’ attributes to bring investors into the country. The first idea was to promote the willingness of rural actors to work with NGOs interested in implementing development projects. Road improvement, the construction of healthcare units, the promotion of education and the diversification of products originated in small family-owned farms were to be incorporated in the country.

The problem was the lack of consistency between the communities. Since each project took part in 1-3 communities, there was no common model and it was hard for

government officers in municipal offices to keep track of the activities. Although some projects seemed to be very successful in matter of education and road improvement, there was no follow-up and projects were doomed to get lost in time.

Noticing the amount of complications this dynamic caused, the national government decided to let each municipality implement their own initiatives according to the different needs they had. Within the first month community leaders were identified and the communication between the population and government officers improved. At the same time, the feeling of communal-empowerment that came as a result of the participatory initiatives released tension from the municipalities as to being the only ones in charge of roads maintenance.

This triumph was enough for the national government to recognize the potential rural communities had. Following the example of Cuba, Nicaragua decided to change its strategy for development; they declared tourism as the main tool for fight poverty. Starting August 2009, the Nicaraguan Municipal Development Institute (INIFOM) and the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR) following the orders of the Government of National Reconciliation and Unity (GRUN) Nicaragua's main activity became tourism, relieving coffee production and cattle raising.

As part of their own plan and supporting the small initiatives that the community was implementing, the municipal government designed a new logo for the city and developed their own municipal brand. With the catchphrase "*San Ramón, Tierra Fertil e Indígena*" (*San Ramón, fertile and indigenous land*), they opened a new office in charge of tourism initiatives and cooperative networks for development. This branch was directed by Carla Tinoco and featured the support of NGOs from Switzerland, Japan and the United States.

The main goal of this office was not only to establish an organized network of tourism related initiatives, but also to provide training according to each personal initiative. Working with the Dutch initiative *UTZ Certified*<sup>9</sup>, the Sister Communities of North

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<sup>9</sup> For further information on UTZ certified initiative and its work in San Ramón refer to Data Chapter 3: Los Andes

Carolina, JICA and other cooperation agencies already established in the country, they provided training in topics like tourism, environmentally friendly agriculture and natural resources conservation. At the same time they made alliances with national universities to implement programs focused on history and anthropology; students would go to San Ramón to study the indigenous heritage and try to enrich the knowledge the municipality had on this topic.

The community of La Garita was very active during this period, not only did they implemented other initiatives besides the guesthouses (guided tours, arts and crafts programs, etc.) but they also tried to promote their municipality in other places of the country. Groups specialized in handcrafted jewelry made out of seeds and recycled glass and wood, assisted fairs in Managua and Masaya, offering their products and the chance to have a participatory session in La Garita.

It is important to mention here that these activities started as being a part of ADETOURS but the opening of a municipal office focused on tourism gave them the opportunity to seek independence and started working on their own, maintaining relations with ADETOURS and the guesthouses to create conjoined programs for tourists.

Aiming towards this diversification Ivania proposed the already registered group of guesthouses to aim for a tighter bond between them and the tourists, exchanging emails, phone numbers and sending postcards. The reason behind this was her idea that if guests left and kept contact with their host families they could later on come back and recommend the programs to their friends, obtaining a good reputation among tourists. (Zeledón, 2015) She also promoted cultural activities and started a small cultural folklore group with the children from guesthouses.

Ivania had always like folklore dances and ever since she was a kid learned all the steps and different combinations. Her mother had enrolled her in class while she was in school and during her time in Cuba she represented the country many times in cultural acts for the Cuban government. She passed on her love towards dancing to her daughter who studied dancing in her undergrads and is now a professional teacher and the leader of the

group. To back up her love towards dancing and facing her financial reality, Ivania learned how to use a sewing machine and design and created her dresses on her own.

The families in the community were eager to involve their children, both boys and girls, in the dancing group. Not only because they wanted for them to represent the municipality in national events but also because folklore as an art suffered a lot during the revolution, the retrieval of that art was not one of the main goals of the government. Children at the same time liked the activity, they had another distraction after school and in such a small city it was good for them to have extracurricular activities.

Since the group was becoming large, by 2010 Ivania had over 20 students, and she needed costumes for them all, they enrolled as a cultural group coming from the CPCPV and were provided with financial support for costumes, room for practice and transportation to Matagalpa to assist cultural events. Ivania recalls that many of the children that started dancing with her are now grown-ups that have been professionally shaped in Managua and now teach in dancing schools or are part of the national ballet.

#### 7.7. Guesthouses recognition: INTUR and NGOs 2012-2014

Two years after Ivania created the group called “*Semillas de la Cultura*” (Seeds of Culture), they became the representatives of the municipality in all sorts of events. The initiative into something so popular that even adults created a group on their own lead by Ivania. This activity captured the attention of INTUR who provided training to the teachers and included the group in their own database for future references and invitation to cultural events inside and outside of the municipality.

However, Ivania’s focus and devotion were not only towards the dancing group. Her dedication to the guesthouse project remained intact and she pursued INTUR ‘s validation, which would allow them to market themselves as a national alternative for tourists. In May 2012, supported by the national government, INTUR created the guesthouse certification and San Ramón was among the first ones to receive certification in all its programs. A small certificate was framed and hung in the entrance of every

guesthouse, allowing tourists to recognize a guesthouse even if they didn't have previous communication with the facilitator.

The certification process for a guesthouse consisted in a sanitary inspection of the accommodations for the guest, a psychological evaluation of the household and two-week long workshop to train the participants in etiquette, hospitality basis and gastronomic diversity as well as a small course in English language to learn the basics (Balmaceda, 2013). Since the initiative was government implemented and part of the national strategy to fight poverty, participants were not required to pay any fees; the only requirement was the house to be settled by the time the inspection was scheduled and the whole family to be willing to take part in the evaluations.

During the primary period of certification and recognition the participation of the municipal government was key for the success of the initiative. The municipality provided INTUR with a detailed list of all guesthouses in La Garita and helped the families schedule interviews; they also provided small grants to those guesthouses that needed small infrastructural improvement in order to pass the evaluation (image 12).

As the certification process gained media attraction and tourists started arriving to San Ramon on a seasonal basis, more and more families gained interest and the number of enrollments to participate as guesthouses increased 13% by 2013 (Alcaldía de San Ramón, 2013). Those families that didn't have the time or conditions to welcome guests started small individual programs that complemented the guesthouse programs. The municipal office of tourism and UCA San Ramón created touristic packages for the guest that included the guesthouse and different activities provided by other providers from the same community. By the end of the year, the packages were so organized that each one of them had a 24 hour guide that spoke at least intermediate level of English.



**Image 12: Improved guest room**



Guesthouse room for two people  
Source: the author, 2015

The first person to receive the certification was obviously Ivania and this was just an incentive for her to keep working on the project. In 2014 Ivania, along with ADETOURS and CPCPV, signed an alliance with UCA San Ramón and the Swiss Cooperation to be featured in the list of accommodations for brigades and tourist. Introducing an affordable alternative and inclusive community-based tourism, the guesthouses initiatives is one of the most successful ones so far.

## VIII. Los Andes- Finca La Hermandad

### 8.1. Agrarian Reform and the *anticooperative movement* 1990

After the revolution, the country not only began to reconstruct itself on infrastructural matters, but also constitutionally. The establishment of a pro-tempore president and national assembly proved to have work for a short period of time, but the need for constitutional reforms was obvious.

In Los Andes, the Agrarian Reform was implemented the same way it was in all the other communities. The exception was the large amount of corruption cases that happened during the process. The lands distributed to foreigners in this community were not as many as in the rest of the municipality but the extension of such lands was bigger. The smallest property comprised 45 hectares and passed through a river, giving the owner exclusive rights on the path.

According to studies made by UCA San Ramón, the owners of these *fincas*<sup>10</sup> employed people in the community to farm the land. With very small investments they were able to build large houses and keep the maintenance on date. At the very entrance of the community there are still buildings left from the initial owners. Called “El Diamante”, this finca had a total area of 325 acres and it was divided per areas. At the entrance on the east is located the kitchen area, on the west was the owner’s house and on the north was a small school implemented for the children of the owner and to teach some of the rural inhabitants the basics on agriculture and cooking.

Due to its good weather and relatively safe location in times of war, Los Andes was considered a privileged area and all of the foreigners that were granted lands in the community were Somoza’s closest friends. After the revolution, the vast majority of the new finca owners fled the country alongside Somoza and left the properties to the

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<sup>10</sup> Textually translated to “farm” in this context it encompasses a wider spectrum: including housing, work area, comunal facilities, etc.

community's jurisdiction. As it is to be expected those people working in each finca distributed the land among themselves and they each took a piece of land big enough to build a house and farm with their families.

In the case of El Diamante, mentioned above, the accommodations that had been built by the foreigners were left intact and even today they all remain. The property is now used as headquarters of an NGO, after the cooperative that took the property as their own decided to sell it for a better cause. The case was not the same for La Hermandad however, which was still being occupied by Somoza's friends. Since the owners of the finca had already been seen as criminals for hiding behind their employees in order for them to keep the property (Mairena S. , 2015), they came up with a solution of integrating the community and working with them in small projects inside Los Andes.

The problem was that the Somoza dictatorship was still too traumatizing for those who had suffered and the idea of working with others was not really comfortable. The institution of cooperatives was just beginning in the country; the National Assembly had pushed a law to regulate their creation and at the same time the work of those associated to the cooperative. The problem was that this same law also limited the possibilities for the creation of a cooperative.

Rural communities and producers with low-financial resources started campaigning against cooperatives. Their theory was that cooperatives were a way to control their production, being managed by the government or foreign state officers. The urban areas and central municipalities of the departments were characterized as urban and therefore were not interested in the creation of cooperatives. This fact only made the farmers suspicion even greater, those that already had financial stability didn't started cooperatives and were not showing any interest in starting any.

The idea to build cooperatives was seen as crazy and instead of avoiding them, some communities took their actions even further and decided to develop complots against them; they would try to talk to those in the community that hadn't join and tell them that

they had an informer on the cooperative that revealed the truth about these cooperatives working as a way to control the producers. This whole movement was unofficially called “the anticooperative movement” and it lasted from 1-2 years.

Since the government or international entities never determined such movement as one, there is no formal study on it, but the people living in the communities and those that were trying to be or already were part of cooperatives in the 90s still give testimony on how hard it was for them to build the movement. Sebastian Mairena, the leader of the Mairena family and now president of the cooperative La Hermandad, recalls the difficulties he and his siblings went through by trying to implement such initiative.

Mairena moved to Los Andes a few years before, right after they lost one of the members of their family due to the revolution. Him, his mother and his other 8 siblings, decided to relocate their families to a safer place where they could work and take care of each other as a family. They asked for a job in La Hermandad and 8 of them started working as farmers, while one of them, Marvin Mairena, was sent to work in the rainforest reserve since he had knowledge about veterinarian medicine and biodiversity. (Mairena S. , 2015)

When the revolution ended and the agrarian reform started its implementation process, they tried to become independent from the owners of the finca and create a cooperative with others in the community. Besides being seen like crazy and government informers, the Mairena family suffered threats from several other members of nearby communities that told them about the risks they would carry if they kept trying to implement that idea into the community. The trauma that the Somoza dictatorship left in the country was seemingly visible in the people’s distrust for collective work and independent production.

Still, the Mairenas tried to join one of the already established cooperatives but failed to feel comfortable with the lack of honest concern for one another among the members. Another problem was the activity that these cooperatives focused on; they had a plan to focus their cooperative in the coffee production and tourism. They wanted to break the

stigma people had on Nicaragua being completely damaged by the revolution and having no chance to be a country rich in touristic offers, which as a collateral damage broke its coffee export business apart.

During one of the visits of an emergency brigade from the United Nations, tourism experts arrived in rural communities to prepare a report and analysis on the possibilities the different areas had on implementing tourism projects. Sebastian remembers to take part in the meeting and hearing the experts say that due to its location and the devastation caused by the revolution, Los Andes didn't have many possibilities to implement tourism related projects and should destine its work to the production of bananas which were easier to commercialize, instead of coffee; even then Sebastian still wanted to implement his idea, the Mairena family wanted to create alternatives and other production methods that could be economically and environmentally friendly.

## 8.2. The birth of Finca La Hermandad 1993-1994

After a period of struggle and the dissolution of several governmental entities, all the communities in San Ramón had to be reinstated from zero. The biggest problem for Los Andes was the constraints its geographical location caused. As a part of their strategy to hide from the national guard, the revolutionaries destroyed the only road leading up the hill and created instead a pathway filled with rocks and riverbeds, making it almost impossible for cars to pass by.

The municipal government offered to provide financial relieve to those living in the community. Although the problem was not merely financial, the community wanted to construct a path from the top of the mountain to the urban area. One of the most affected people were the foreigners that stayed in the area after the revolution. The agrarian reform, just as any other and as it may happen in any other country, had its glitches and the worst one was its ineffectiveness in mountainous rural areas.

Foreigners had managed to hide from those in charge of taking back the lands and disguised behind their own workers, they kept the lands. Their efforts, however, were in vane. Without a proper road to come and go from the community there was no commercial possibility to be offered on a short period and they could not wait. So it happened to the Americans that owned over 30 hectares of a land that included a virgin rain forest reserve. Their first idea was to use the land for the production of coffee but during the revolution the plants were ripped away and without a road it was impossible for them to transport all the equipment their business required.

In 1993 they decided to sell the finca to the Mairena family who had been part of their workers since they first moved in. The selling process was a complicated transition, in order for them to sell it without acknowledging the fact that they had been hiding from the agrarian reform they had to present themselves to the municipality as a collective of cooperatives. Under a provisional name and a pretended collective of cooperatives, they sold the finca entirely on a very cheap price with the condition that the rainforest would remain intact and be taken care of by the new owners. (Mairena S. , 2015)

When the Mairena family purchased the land they had planned to grow different types of fruits and coffee plants and sell them. The rainforest was to remain as a natural reserve, untouched and with a few trails for general supervision of flora and fauna (image 13). After the experts from the United Nations brigade told them there was no future in tourism their motivation decreased, so they came up with the fruit cultivation as a backup plan, without forgetting completely about the possibilities to implement tourism and now, doing it in the natural reserve.

Since they still wanted to work as a cooperative but needed to convince the community that others did not control them, they slowly started to involucrate them in their initiatives and activities. Their first action was to develop and open workshops and group work to teach and learn about coffee, vegetables and fruits cultivation. They also created communal pieces of lands inside their own finca, where the whole community would

grow at least one type of crop and the product would be donated to those in the community that needed it.

Parallel to this, Marvin, who is specialized in veterinary medicine and studied the biodiversity of the forest, started a census and categorization on the different animal species in the forest. His plan was to create a complete census so he could take care of the animals and assist them in case of an emergency. At the same time, this would help them pass through the forest, knowing the existence and location of animals that could possibly be a threat to those inside the forest. Since he didn't want to disturb the animals and in order for the reserve to remain virgin, the treks were marked with stones and pieces of fallen wood from the trees inside.

**Image 13: Entrance to the forest**



Entrance to the forest  
Source: the author, 2015

Marvin also felt the need to create rest areas, since the dimension of the forest by itself was too big to go around it without feeling the need to sit down at least three times on the way. He design five different rest areas and out of larger pieces of wood built small

benches for people to sit down, and hung signs in the trees that marked the path and the location of the rest areas in the trails. Alongside the five rest areas his sister came up with the idea of creating three gazers, where tourists could appreciate the northern end of the forest, the southern end of the forest and on top of the highest hill to contemplate the mountain in which the finca was located.

### 8.3. Development of a multi-grade school 1995

Following up their purpose to get organized and work with the community, the Mairena family came up with the idea to implement a multi-grade school for children and adults. Within the framework of national literacy movement promoted by the government, they realized the need to teach the community the basics of reading and writing. During one of the community meetings that Los Andes had been holding since one and a half years ago, they raised the problem of illiteracy among the community, especially within children that in that given moment had no possibilities to go to school since the closest one was 20 km away.

The idea of a multi-grade school encompassed the need to hire a teacher, or more than one, to teach in three different shifts. In the morning, they would teach children under 15 who needed to learn to read and write as well as basic primary school knowledge in order for them to be accepted in the elementary school of La Garita. The afternoon shift focused on children 15-20 who mostly knew how to read and write already but had to catch up with history, geography, math and other school subjects in order to be accepted in the local high school. Finally, the night shift aimed adults who worked during the daytime but had interest and the need to learn writing and reading and mathematics. (Ministerio Nicaraguense de Educacion )

The community accepted the project and joined the Mairena family in the finance and recruiting of teachers that could accept the project, starting with community based tutors. Employing people from within the community would make them feel more comfortable and it would be easier for grown-ups to take the transition since Nicaraguan culture is



very reserved when it comes to admitting the lack of knowledge in a subject considered as basic, such as writing, reading and basic mathematics.

One of the challenges that this implementation faced was the possible alienation of the community from the rest of the municipality. If they limit themselves to working only inside the community the connection with other communities and the goal of the cooperative movement would be lost completely, as well as any hopes to develop one in Los Andes. Even though the reason behind this was the idea of using local workforce and producing jobs for those that did not work in agriculture, the community accepted to hire other teachers and to give room for the brigades that the government sent during the literacy movement.

One of the advantages that this initiative had was that it encouraged the community to work in the road improvement. If they were going to receive people from the brigade and if the kids would have the chance to go to the central community to go further with their studies, they needed to have a road where at least double traction cars would pass and also marking the way to and from the community to avoid children and brigades getting lost on their way to Los Andes. Because of the existence and perfect condition of the finca El Diamante, the trek they had to improve and habilitate was less than expected, according to Sebastian an estimate of only 15 kms needed to be habilitated from zero.

On March 1995 the multi-grade school of Los Andes opened with a total of 20 students per shift and with only semi-habilitated road. By the time the brigades reached the community the community had advanced on their work more than 10% (Alcaldía de San Ramón, 2013) and the integration of teachers from other communities created a sense of cooperation and twinning among the community. Sebastian who was working as one of the teachers for the night shift, where they had over 50 students, says that this was, in his persona opinion, the number one reason the community later on accepted the idea of a cooperative.

#### 8.4. Creation of Cooperative La Hermandad 1996-1999

The main goal behind the construction of a cooperative was to organize themselves and work with a larger group of people, thus having bigger workforce and being able to face the economic situation the country was living through during those days. Cooperatives were a way to turn a community into a self-sustainable community, with the creation of networks amongst different actors and different producers.

In 1996 the community finally agrees to the creation of a cooperative that worked with all the different producers interested in joining. Since there was still some skepticism in Los Andes, they opened the cooperative for other communities that wanted to join them. Following not only the name of the finca but also their belief that cooperatives were meant to work as families, they named it La Hermandad, creating this way the finca La Hermandad and the Cooperative La Hermandad.

The major difference between this cooperative and the other ones in the municipality was that due to the fact that it was open for everyone that wanted to join, it hosted people with different political ideologies, religious beliefs and economical situation. The name couldn't have suit them better, the creation of this cooperative implied the creation of a twining amongst the producers without settling for a simple network; the twining was stronger than the simple network building the other cooperatives had.

The initial number of members in the cooperative was only 8, even though people believed in the benefits of cooperatives they not all agreed to the idea of building one with others that had different ideologies and religion. In this context the Mairena family decided have only by Sebastian and his sister Carmen as members or the cooperative, making an effort to avoid the thought of them trying to control the rest of the members by outnumbering them. Currently there are 20 members in the cooperative out of which 5 belong to the Mairena family.

When they first started they didn't imagine having so many great outcomes out of the constitution of a cooperative. The most significant change they had was the trespass of half of the finca to the cooperative, half of the area which is categorized as finca La Hermandad was donated to the cooperative to work as a collective and develop projects for Los Andes and the rest of the communities around the area; even though it was a big challenge at the beginning Sebastian says that to him that is the true meaning of working in cooperatives, working for a collective benefit instead of personal one.

As a matter of fact, the cooperative defined in its constitution that the most important part of working together was working together, listening to one another and the ability to carry on movements as a group and not individuals. The inclusion in all projects amongst the members is also defined as one of their principles; whether the projects are touristic, agricultural or environmental, the most important thing is that all the members are aware of their creation and development. Along the years, the entire cooperative agrees, this is what they stand out in the most, inclusiveness.

The hardest part in the constitution of the cooperative was, according to Sebastian, who in 1996 was voted as the first president of the cooperative and who got reelected for the third time in 2015, taking decisions as a collective; *"human resource is the hardest thing to manage"* (Mairena S. , 2015) he says. Each member has a different perspective on the issue, which ultimately causes him or her to have a different take on the importance or lack of it of the matter. Cooperatives work directly with human resources and human capital; therefore it can take up to a month to reach an agreement in which more than 50% of the members agree.

This diversity of thought is, however, one of the reasons cooperatives are created in the first place. The different perspectives allow a community to determine the real needs they have and the importance of each project. In the case of La Hermandad, once they had constituted themselves as a cooperative, they opened up to welcoming more members because, with the help of UCA San Ramon where they entered as associates in 1998, they

realized that building cooperatives also made them perspective choices for sponsors and loans.

La Hermandad as a cooperative laminated and printed their constitution, to hand it to other producers that might be interested in joining and in the last page they posted a statement on behalf of the entire cooperative that reads: *the benefit of cooperatives is that the only thing you need is the will to create it. When people get together to help each other and create new projects and initiatives, they are able to make agreements that don't affect anyone and from there one a twining is created.* (Cooperativa La Hermandad, 1998)

#### 8.5. Infrastructural Improvements and ecological transformations 2000-2005

When the Mairena family finally settled in the property and they had organized the land in private, public and restricted areas, they focused on finishing what they started when they first arrived, the infrastructural improvements of the community. The road needed to have a space big enough for their truck to fit as well as construction machinery that they might need in the long term. At the same time, they had to leave some space for pedestrians, which were in its majority students on their way to school.

It took the family and the community a period of three years to finish the road. Since there was no budget they only improved the condition but there was no pavement or signs in it. In order to make sure it was accessible for trucks with double traction, the Mairena family offered to test it with their truck as they were building it. So they worked in a way that every kilometer was tested and if it was too hard or impossible for the truck to go up that part, they went back and worked on it again. With the use of only shovels and pickaxes, they finally covered the entire trek with gravel to avoid the formation of mud or holes during the rainy season.

This process of working together for something that ultimately would be taken as a common benefit brought the community further together. The most important outcome of

this process was the cooperation between all the communities that were in the same area as Los Andes. Over 10 communities joined forces for this period of time and not only the network between producers grew but the friendship and projects became more successful. At the end of the three years period, the communities had chosen leaders that gathered in weekly meetings.

The meetings worked the same way municipal assemblies did; the leaders would bring up projects their communities wanted to implement and the rest of the communities tried to come up with a way of helping each other. At the same time, they created the first communities council, integrated by a total of 11 communities of the area. One of the first, and most important, activities promoted by the council was the integration of the other 10 communities to the multi-grade school opened in La Hermandad and the implementation of home-schooling for children who lived too far away from the center.

The council also implemented several different initiatives related to agriculture; one of them was the retrieval of the coffee production. When the Mairena family arrived in Los Andes, all the coffee plantation had been completely removed, out of what once was over 5 hectares of coffee there were only two visible patches of around 5 meters each, which very deteriorated and almost dead plants. Sharing the empiric knowledge the other communities had, they started working in the recovery of the coffee, using a different variety than the one they previously had and being careful not to get affected by any type of fungus that might reach the area.

The finca was turned into a different type of facility, with the integration of the multi-grade school and the newly implemented diverse agriculture; they were on the path to becoming a stable finca once again. This changed the perspective the finca had about itself, things started to be manage and oriented towards a more environmental and agricultural direction than merely social.

As a part of this growth, Sebastian and Marvin got motivated to research about small and inexpensive initiatives that they could implement in the finca, with the help of the

cooperative, to become more sustainable and produce less amount of cull in the process of the coffee production. One of the phases of the coffee cycle is the process between the grain maturation and the subsequent drying that comes before the final grinding. Within this two stages the coffee bean comes out of its skin with the use of water where it is soaked for a determine period of time (wet process of coffee) after that, it is left to dry in the sun where another process peels it from a very thin skin that covers the bin on the inside (dry process of coffee).

One of the initiatives that both Marvin and Sebastian thought to be feasible and appropriate for their finca and the benefit of the cooperative was the ecological transformation to the wet process of coffee. With the cooperative's support they decided to build an oxidation pond and filters. The process was simple; the pond would serve, as a place where water used for the wet process could be stored. Once it was used, the filters separated the pulp (skin) of the grains, which were finally collected and used as organic compost (image 14).

**Image 14: Organic Compost**



Initial tests for organic compost using earthworms  
Source: the author, 2015

At first the process was complicated and the idea of building the mechanism without a proper expert on the system seemed impossible. But according to Sebastian, that is one of the advantages that cooperatives have. They used the knowledge of everyone in the

cooperatives to make sure they could implement a mechanism suitable for their needs. Those that had doubts on one aspect could ask those that knew about it and vice-versa. Parallel to that this initiative boosted the community's self-esteem; knowing that with the help of their neighbors they could work in projects they didn't know everything about helped them understand and appreciate the real goal of group work in a small community.

Within the first year of its construction the ecological transformation to the wet process saved the finca more than 62% of the water resources they were using so far (Mairena S. , 2015). It also opened the door to bigger improvements, the compost that came as a secondary result of the transformation improved the quality of the fruits they produced, and since the amount of compost was too big to use only on their property, they offered the cooperative to share it for free, under the condition they implemented similar eco-friendly initiatives in their own fincas.

#### 8.6. Beginning of the Agro-ecotourism project and UTZ certification 2008-2009

After the success of the ecological transformation, the significant improvement of the quality in their fruits production, the defined treks around the forest and the accessibility to the finca thanks to the improvement of the road, the Mairena family started to think about bigger projects to implement. Their goal was to complement their initiative with a project that included tourism, oriented towards the promotion of environmental friendly actions in the daily life of the tourist.

Since the finca opened, the family wanted to share their respect towards the nature with other people, especially those that lived in the urban area and worked in companies big enough to make a change in the environment. This idea came since they were born, their mother taught them the respect towards everything the nature gives and how they needed to take care of the environment in order for the environment to take care of them. This belief was the key to their actions in the rainforest, Marvin, who had more experience in the forest, says that he knew that no matter what happened they needed to take care of the forest and show people how important nature is. (Mairena M. , 2015)

Going into the idea of implementing touristic programs in the community, the family knew that whether this initiative was successful or not, they had taken care of the animals and the forest so they had no regrets. At the same time, the community felt confident enough to work as tour guides in their own lands, and they offered their support by opening walking tours around their own fincas and overnight stays for tourists that wanted to join them in activities like bird-watching in the morning or bat-watching during the night.

The first step was the full habilitation of the forest as a touristic spot. Even though years before they had started creating resting areas and gazers, they needed more specific and dynamic areas as well a prepared programs with activities that tourists could engage in. The signage of the trees provided the tourist information about the age of each tree, its characteristics and interesting facts about it. In order to select trees and areas that could catch the attention of the tourists, Marvin and three other people from the community camped in the forest for a week. At the same time, they made a database of all the animals they knew lived in the forest, among them were pumas, toucans and rattlesnakes.

They based their project in four specific pillars: cultural, social, environmental and economic. The cultural part was focused on the promotion of the costumes of San Ramon. The idea of offering homestays and including tourists in their day-by-day lifestyles was linked to the importance it had for them, the preservation of the rural costumes in Nicaragua, costumes that due to globalization and migration from the younger generation towards the city areas, were getting lost.

The social branch aimed towards the implementation of further projects that could potentially benefit not only their community but also other communities that worked with them. The multi-grade school had proved to be of great service; by 2008 they had managed to educate over 50 students that had been accepted to schools with full scholarships. This area would also try to motivate communities to build cooperatives specialized in the area they felt the most confident about and promote group work as well as the thrive towards a sustainable development implemented by themselves.



The environmental side wanted to promote a better relationship between the people and the environment. The multi-grade school was teaching its students about global warming and after working in the coffee production and being one of the best producers of bananas in the municipality, the community of Los Andes knew on first hand the damage that global warming was causing. They wanted to use tourism to demonstrate the importance the environment had for the future generations and promote a culture that could be followed-up by those that worked in areas where change could be made on a first instance.

Finally the economic frame was based on their ultimate goal of having a self-sustainable community. The idea was that community based tourism could be implemented without high investments. The use of the natural and human resources they already had was the basis for this goal. If this type of tourism proved to be successful in Los Andes, they could implement more initiatives similar to this one and come up with annual budget plans that included the allocation of the new incomes in the community as well as personal accounts. This would create a community that was not spending all its money on the implementation a new initiative but using the earned money in the maintenance of the one they already had.

Parallel to the planning and preparation, which included the construction of small bungalows for the guests to stay in, the finca La Hermandad received the news that they had been nominated to be a part of the UTZ Certified program. In a short explanation, UTZ certified is a program and label for sustainable farming; it covers good agricultural practices, farm management, social and living conditions and the environment (UTZ, 2015). Focused on the production of cocoa and coffee, La Hermandad joined the program thanks to its successful and sustainable implementation of an innovative program for the treatment of wastewater from coffee processing.

The project, which initially was intended only for the production of compost and biogas, evolved along the years. By 2009 they were not only saving water and improving the

quality of their crops, but contamination in soils, water bodies and nearby households decreased by over 70%. At the same time, the project was starting its first workshop with the community, explaining them how the implementation process worked and how they could do it in their own households.

This initiative was valued by UTZ certified and granted them the seal for their coffee, both raw grain and processed package. Coffee that has UTZ certification has added value in the eyes of the internationally community since it assures the buyer that it has been produced under the recognized standards and the production cycle includes social projects that benefit a community in need.

#### 8.7. Bio-digester construction and Field School 2010-2013

The UTZ certification was only the beginning of the environmental changes the finca made. This transformation became famous in the department and they were recognized as pioneers in bioenergy. The compost, produced from the wastewater was enough to feed the entire finca, so in 2010, with the help of UTZ certification, they change all of their electricity systems to ones fed with bioenergy.

To evolve into a more complex system that could help the finca use the energy wisely and distribute it along other areas as well as use the gases generated in common household activities they implemented a bio digester (image 15). This digester breaks down the biodegradable materials left after the full coffee production treatment in the absence of oxygen and turns them into fuel, which in the case of La Hermandad is used in the kitchen and emergency generator for the community center. (Saskatchewan Research Council, 2013)

In order to learn how to use this technology type of technology and provide maintenance to the digester, a total of 14 people including Sebastian and all his family were trained by UTZ. After the training they were certified as technicians in bio digester systems, which serves them not only to take care of the unit they have but also work with other

communities and prepare them to join the initiative by implementing ecological transformations in their own fincas.

**Image 15: Bio digester**



Filters from the bio digester at the Mairena's property.  
Source: the author, 2015

The Mairenas considered the importance of the trainings they had received along the years. A total of over 20 books and explanatory pamphlets were kept in a facility open for everyone. The communities that worked around Los Andes as well as the people from Los Andes joined this idea of collecting books and information that could be useful for the producers. They needed a bigger facility, a library that focused on information for farmers, separated from the library that was built for the multi-grade school.

With the goal of making agro-ecological innovations, meaning technologies that were not known or used before and are implemented and created in an empirical way, they created the Field School in 2013. This school was a method of sharing information among each other, teaching other farmers the methods they were using and the knowledge they had acquired from their parents that turned to be sustainable so far.

At the same time, the Field School was to generate economic benefits to the families in matter of better quality and larger quality of production; environmental benefits to the communities, by exchanging methods to preserve the environment in the process of sustainability and finally looking for rural alternatives to address climate change. All of

these new ideas and projects were to be developed from the point of view of those that suffered the most: producers in rural areas.

The first outcome of the Field School was the full commercial production of bio-fertilizers, made out of mountain organisms. The cooperative started the production and commercialization of the bio-fertilizers they had learn to make in the school, increasing the earnings of the community and using the money they gathered for the implementation of another bio-digester set to be installed in the northern end of the community and shared with the people from the community of El Diamante by the end of 2016.

#### 8.8. Eco-lodge and opening of the rural and eco-touristic project in the Finca 2014-2015

After several years of planning and many ideas shared among the community and the family, La Hermandad was ready to open its first-ever touristic project in full capacity. The design of the bungalows and the buildings were ready in 2014 and with the bio-digested project they had full functioning electricity generated from environmental friendly fuel. The construction was designed to host a total of 10 people, two rooms with four beds and two other rooms with a king size bed.

All of the rooms had mosquito nets and due to the geographical location of the finca there was no need of fan. Television was not available since they wanted the tourists to connect with nature, books, however, about the work they did and basic information about the rainforest. At the same time, they build a common area where they gave small crash courses on the functions of the finca as well as share games and opinion with each other. This same area served as dinning room where a kitchen was built on the back, using biogas and wood the wives of both Marvin and Sebastian are the ones in charge of cooking.

The first costumers in the eco-lodge came from NGO brigades that worked with communities from the area, not necessarily only Los Andes. These brigades took part of a participatory evaluation process, where the Mairena family asked them their opinion and

suggestions on what they could do to make the stay more dynamic and which activities they would like to be introduced into the program.

According to Sebastian there are two different types of tourism, conventional tourism and sustainable tourism. La Hermandad wanted to implement sustainable tourism, in which cooperatives play a key role since you work in an inclusive way with the community and different actors exchange their skills providing variety to the programs. The goal of sustainable tourism is to work towards the benefit of the family and the community instead of only economic improvement of one single individual.

This type of tourism is related to the current tripod La Hermandad has: cooperative, agro-eco-tourism and agro-ecology. If you don't produce in a sustainable and environmental friendly manner, people will be affected in different ways; in order to produce in this manner you need to incorporate different points of view and ask for the participation of the community which means cooperatives; finally all of this includes the promotion of these actions in order to create a chain of respectable costumes in other communities and the cooperation of international entities, leading to tourism.

Currently, the cooperative holds four different projects, giving them all the same importance as the others. The environmental project works in the frame of climate change and mitigation and prevention. The educational project works for the development of rural communities. The agricultural project opens a new vision towards agriculture in rural areas and community-created technologies in a world where globalization is taking over. Finally, the Field School passes the information to the younger generations, assuring the generational relief in rural communities.

In the particular case of San Ramon, moreover Los Andes, NGOs have played a key role, working as tourism promoters and bringing new ideas based on their country of origin.

## **IX. Evolution of San Ramón's development stakeholders evolution: 1990-2015**

Rural development consists on the improvement of the overall situation of a society; key to that argument is the definition of the improvement's stakeholders. One of the many misconceptions is the thought that the stakeholders are investors or government, when reality is that stakeholders are built up of a complex chain and will include all of the parts.

For San Ramón, the measurement of the impact in other communities and the success of their model for the development plan can easily be determined by the evolution of the stakeholders since the beginning of the cooperative movement until last year when the field research was performed in 2015. The current chapter introduces the evolution of such actors in three different periods: the initial stakeholders in 1990, millennium stakeholders in 2000 and the current stakeholders by the year 2015.

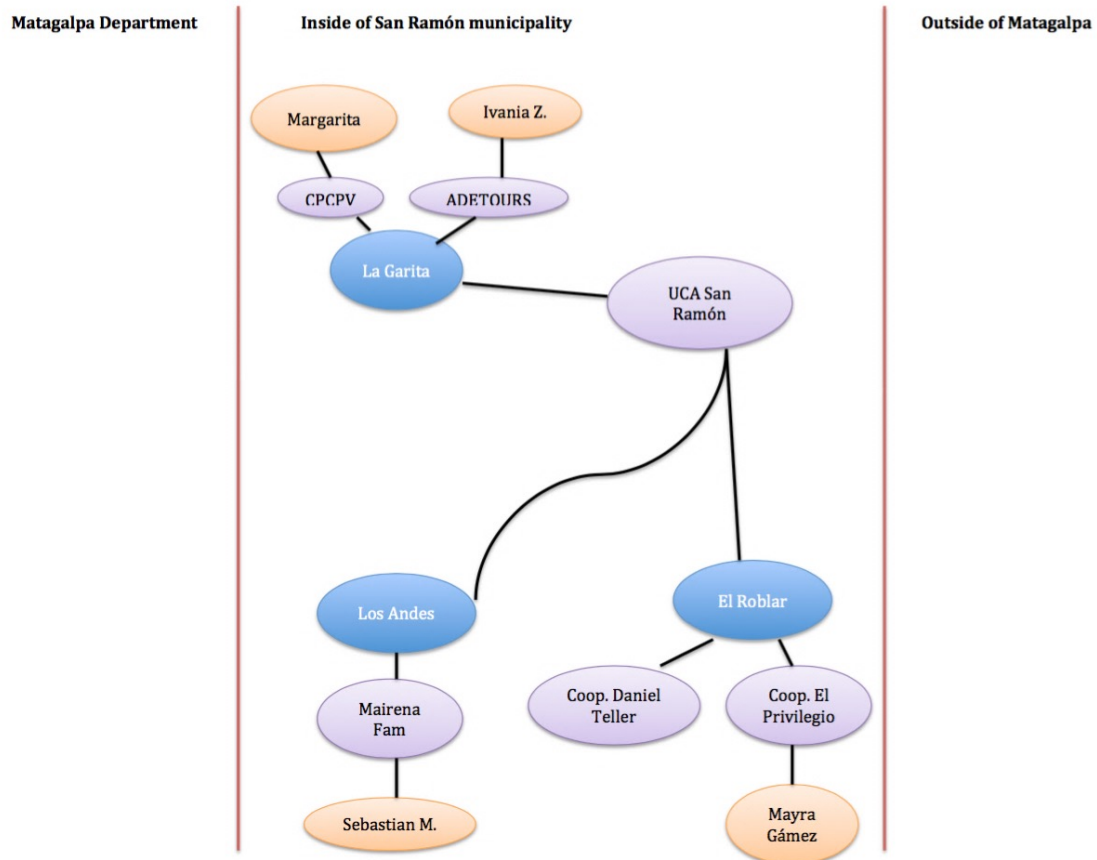
Needless to say, not all of the stakeholders are portrayed in these figures because of the extension of the municipality. Therefore, the following are only stakeholders that were directly influenced by the three communities studied for this research. The figure is divided in three sectors: stakeholders from the Matagalpa department, stakeholders from San Ramón and stakeholders from outside areas from the department of Matagalpa.

### 9.1. Initial stakeholders: post-revolution period 1990

As I reflected in the introduction of the cases, the 1990s were an important period in the history of San Ramón because of the post-revolution consequences. Not only did they have to reconstruct the entire municipality but society's psychological damage had to be taken into account.

The already mentioned anti-cooperative movement made it hard for any type of initiative to be created. Besides that, the inexistent international cooperation was a setback for small ideas that needed financing. The government was putting all of its efforts in trying to reconstruct the country and provide enough education for society in order to assure social improvement.

**Figure 5: Stakeholders in 1990**



San Ramón's development stakeholders in 1990  
Source: the author, 2016

The initial situation shows a relatively small amount of stakeholders because of the impact of the anti-cooperative movement (figure 5). Initially the government had no involvement in the initiatives and those in charge of the implementation of different cooperatives and key individuals of the communities set the beginning for the creation of networks.

Stakeholders were limited to those inside of the community and the general concept and ideas were starting to be theorized.

UCA San Ramón interconnected the three communities, since this organization was initially opened to create networks. The problem was that there was still no communication with the governmental offices and the introduction of national policies was still impossible. However, communities implemented their projects and as we can

see in the following period, the integration of an international organization was one of their priorities.

The idea of involving an international organization and governmental entities did not presume the overpowering of the community leaders. Opposite to that, it meant the facilitation of larger networks and development of more consistent and feasible ideas. Although empiric knowledge was highly valued and the community was making use of its resources, and there was no plan to implement community-based tourism, they still recognized the possibilities of improvement and the possible outcomes that could come from a passive involvement of outside actors.

## 9.2. Millennium-period stakeholders: 2000

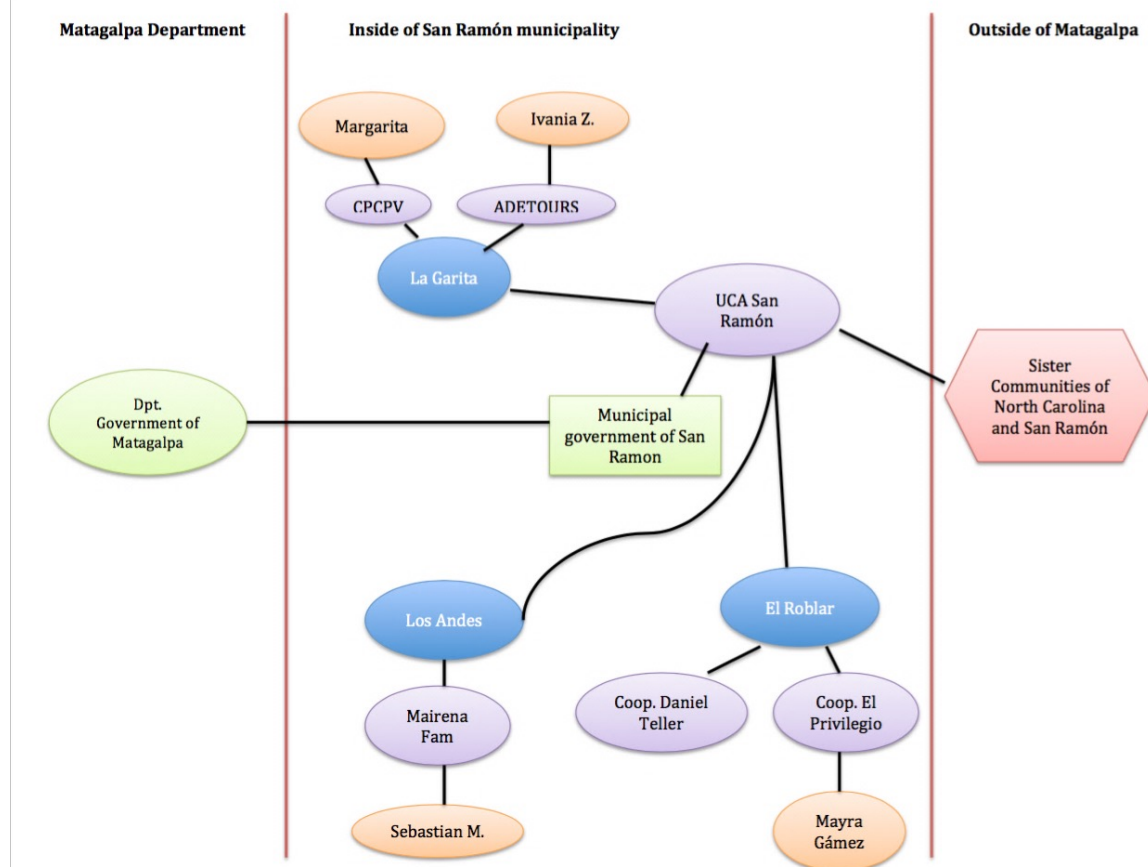
Within a time period of ten years, and after communities had recovered from the revolution, Nicaragua was entering the starting process of development and it was annexed to the millennium development goals as one of the crisis countries. Although economically the country had stabilized and illiteracy rate was under 5%, there was still social recovery to be achieved.

In San Ramón, the recognition of the rural development initiatives in the communities, through UCA San Ramón and the municipality's own efforts. Achieving their goal to attract foreign stakeholders required a more detailed explanation of their initiatives and an active work alongside the municipality. During this period, essential stakeholders were added to the initiative.

It is noticeable here the empowerment of the community, the new stakeholders were incorporated into the spectrum by decision of the community and their work as well as their level of involvement was determined by the community (figure 6).



**Figure 6: Stakeholders in 2000**



San Ramón's development stakeholders in 2000  
Source: the author, 2016

The stakeholders started to increase, the incorporation of governmental offices as well as an international organization that was solely created for the municipality and UCA San Ramón was going to be determinant for the future of the initiative. During this period, the implementation of community-based tourism and guesthouses took place and the door of interest to other communities in the municipality was opened.

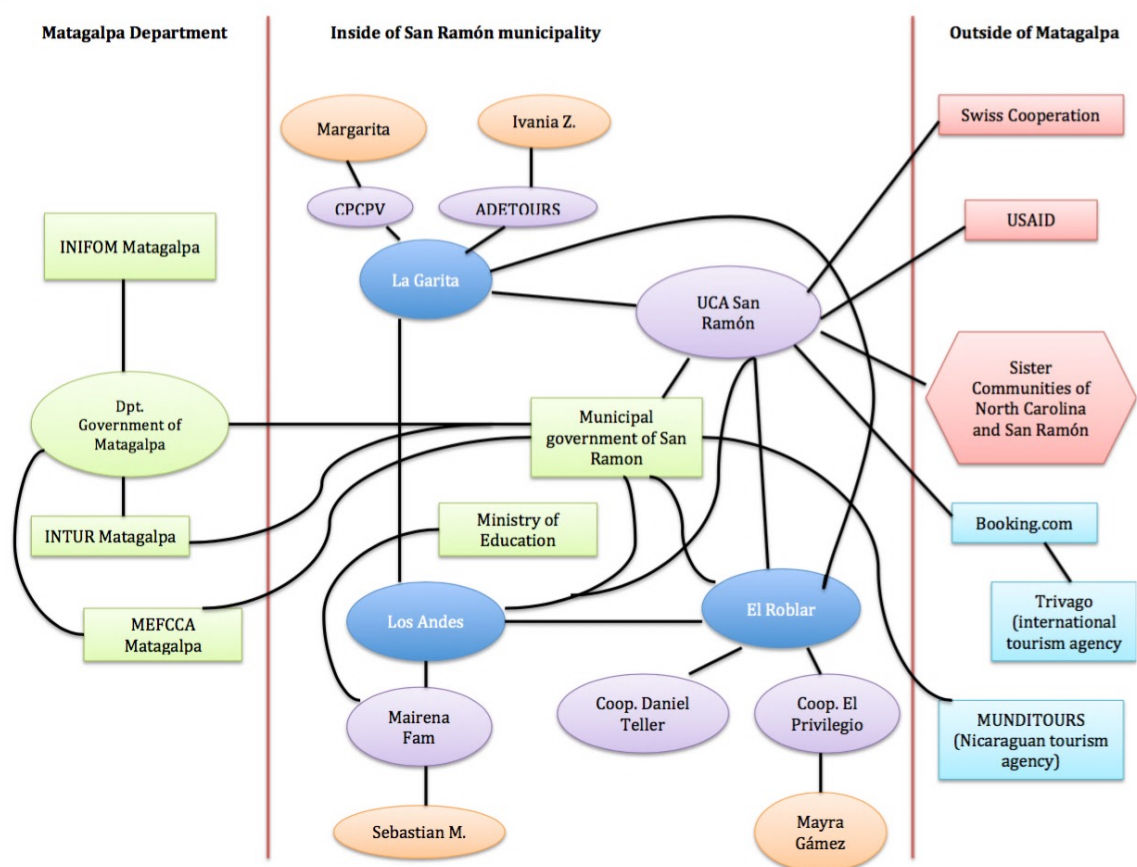
Communities had no longer to seek for resources in other areas, their own potential was being encouraged and community capacity was increasing significantly. Parallel to that, the empowerment and proactivity of the municipality are at its peak point, which is reflected in the last figure that shows the sudden increase and development of the model as well as the power of influence the three communities introduced in this study had.

### 9.3. Current stakeholders: 2015

The following stakeholders in figure 7 show the biggest amount of change in the municipality. Last year, according to the municipal government, a total of over 180 programs were accounted for 96 communities. This means that the network expanded to all of the communities, promoting the creation of at least two programs per community. This is just for the programs that were registered for training with the help of the municipality.

The outcome of this approach to the PNDH has echoed in the entire municipality, promoting initiatives that are sustainable and inclusive. These three small communities that started out with the idea of using resources they had instead of importing them from other areas have now attracted stakeholders from universities, tour operators and even economic entities from governmental offices.

**Figure 7: Stakeholders in 2015**



San Ramón's development stakeholders in 2015

Source: the author, 2016

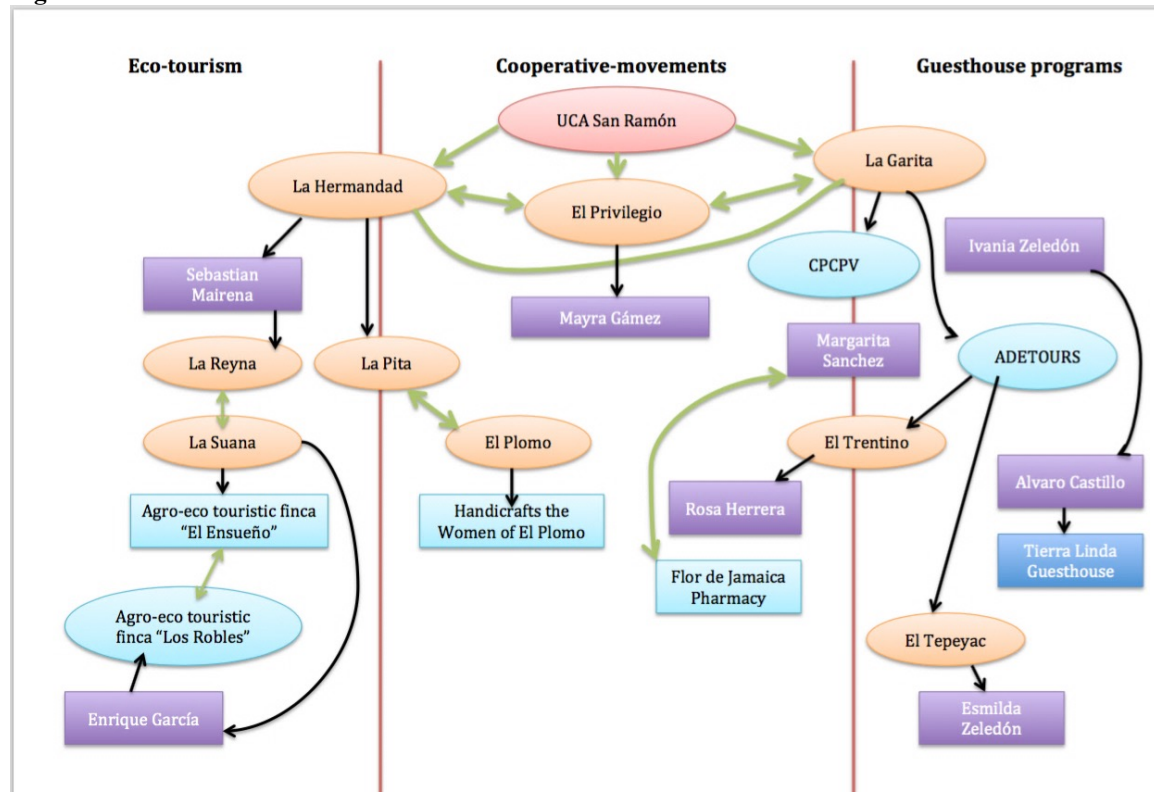
Not only the created an impact inside their municipality, but their efforts and proactivity can be seen even outside of the country. With the integration of Internet tour operators such as booking.com and trivago, the offer has extended to tourists from other countries. Community based tourism created a strong link between individual initiatives, collective initiatives, government, NGOs and international organizations.

Furthermore, networks are increasing and strengthening amongst communities and facilitation organizations. Since its beginning 25 years ago, the stakeholders have changed drastically as well as the model that San Ramón is using. Guiding itself under the parameters of governmental policies and using such policies to support their activities is one of the components that created a sustainable rural development approach.

#### 9.4. Community networks and their evolution

Finally, to exemplify the networks amongst communities in detail a final figure will be introduced. Figure 8 is also based only on the immediate interested subjects, meaning that the municipality's full network amongst communities is bigger and more complicated but in order to provide an example and use the range of the research, I created the diagram only under the direct networks amongst the three studied municipalities.

**Figure 8: Networks around communities**



Impact of the cases among rural communities/ networks around communities

Source: the author, 2016

The direction of the arrows in this diagram shows the relationship between each actor. Arrows that point in one single direction, show who influenced whom, while as arrows that point in both directions indicate a parallel relationship between both actors, they might work together or one project depends on the other.

Finally, the division in this case is focused on the three types of initiatives: eco-tourism, cooperative movements and guesthouses. The leaders of each division are introduced as the cases presented in this study, lead all by UCA San Ramón (nowadays) since it is the organism that holds together all cooperatives.

## **X. Sustainable Community-based Tourism for Rural Development in San Ramón**

Rural development can be accomplished in many different ways but in Nicaragua, the beginning to that development is brought by international organizations. Rural communities are not retroactive, but the idea of them being capable to achieve economic stability and sustainable projects is hard to portray. Social standards in the country have managed to create the image that entrepreneurs can only come from economically well-off households and education has to be provided in higher institutions.

The debunking that Nicaraguan society has towards empiric knowledge is caused by the misconception of development. If anyone were to randomly ask, in Nicaragua, what do they imagine the country should look like were development achieved, they would most likely describe big cities such as Tokyo or New York. Rural development is not taken into account as a sustainable alternative. Therefore the possibilities that big companies provide an opportunity to small initiatives based on empiric knowledge are unfeasible.

San Ramón is starting to prove the opposite; taking advantage of its natural and human resources, it is developing new initiatives focused on tourism, where the municipality is the main character. The community has created a series of different tourism related projects that go from guesthouses all the way to historic tourism tours and adventure tourism. Although the path towards a sustainable tourism enterprise has more obstacles for a rural community than for an urban community, San Ramón's inhabitants are reluctant to failure.

Since the 1990s after the Sandinista revolution, San Ramón decided that they were not going to be stigmatized because of their past and alongside their reconstruction process they also created diverse initiatives in every community, working together to reach economic stability and promote the municipality. During the implementation process of these initiatives, key factors made San Ramón different than other rural areas.

By promoting community capacity and community networking, the municipal government allowed the creation of initiatives that responded to the community's needs. One of the determining characteristics was that those needs were established by the community itself not the government. Participatory evaluation and decision-making granted the people a sense of inclusion and appropriation towards the municipality.

In this chapter I will highlight the qualities that the three described cases present, in order to study the implementation of rural development initiatives based on sustainable community-based tourism in the area of San Ramon. Making use of the concepts introduced in the second chapter.

#### 10.1. Relationship between studied cases and sustainable development

What attracted me the most about San Ramón's case, specifically these three cases, is the ability that the communities had to link their own individual projects with a community-based tourism initiative. Since the government had already declared tourism as the country's main tool to fight poverty and the amount of support provided for tourism projects was every year bigger, the idea of linking them both was ought to be successful.

The problem is that community-based tourism is not something that Nicaragua prides itself the most. Even though rural communities compose most of the country, we define tourism from a very narrow perspective. The Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism, for example, holds brochures with different tourism offers around the country in its office. During my research I had several meetings with officers from this institute and realized there is not one single brochure that offers community-based tourism.

In Nicaragua, rural community tourism offers are seen as only a one-day attraction. In the case of San Ramón its biggest offer is in a neighbor community of La Garita, where nature has created a waterfall to turn into white water during the fall and crystal clear water in the pond. It is called "Cascada Blanca" and a man who moved into San Ramón 15 years ago from Denmark privately owns it.

This means that communities like the ones I studied don't have reasons to use tourism to promote themselves. The idea of doing so, because of this, didn't come merely of the tourism as a tool for poverty initiative, but also because due to the sense of community they gained in the cooperatives, they had interest in promoting themselves and their culture.

During one of my interviews with Ivania I asked her if she had a chance to go back and work in an important company using her degree as a hydraulic engineer, having a stable income and higher than the basic salary, would she do it? Her answer was a clear and sound no, and not because of her guesthouse or because of the attachment she now has with everyone in ADETOURS and the CPCPCV, but because she feels happy and accomplished when she promotes San Ramón.

From a community level, every community tried to make a link with tourism because they wanted foreigners to see their costumes and their way of living. In La Hermandad, Sebastian says that his purpose behind implement agro eco-tourism is to teach the younger generation, who in Nicaragua are the primary costumers for tourism in the northern region of the country, about environmental friendly alternatives.

This same idea is behind El Roblar's guesthouses and participative programs. Mayra wants to not only promote her coffee but also teach about the importance of networking in a community. These women that are now a part of El Privilegio, have a stable income and sustainable initiatives because they worked together. They want to teach about the success there is behind a collective perspective instead of an individual one.

One the other hand, from a municipality level, all of the communities in San Ramón have one single goal: to make San Ramón a tourism destination on its own instead of a stop-by spot on the way to sponsored touristic destinations. During my research in San Ramón, I had the opportunity to attend one of the municipality's leaders' meetings. During this event the political leaders, social leaders and cooperative directors gather to discuss the problems in the community.

This occasion is not only an opportunity for them to connect with each other and be aware of what is happening in other communities, but they also get a chance to come up with ideas for collective benefit. One of these ideas was the use and promotion of tourism focused on the initiatives they already had. Promoting the uniqueness of San Ramón and standing out what makes their coffee producing cooperatives, their guesthouses and their fincas different from the others. The answer to this was simple and given by one of the directives from UCA San Ramón: the people.

If they were able to link their initiatives with a tourism related alternative, standing out their human resources, sustainability was one of the biggest outcomes. The challenge laid in finding an attractive item in the already developed initiatives. They all took examples from previous ideas as well as recommendations from each other. The guesthouses, however, seemed to be a suitable option for all of the communities, using producers' houses as the place where tourist could stay.

Involving them with the everyday-life of the rural communities was a possible attractive. At the same time, it would incorporate the initiatives they already had. In the case of La Hermandad, their offer was based on the family initiative and division of labor. The one problem they had left was the recruitment of tourists and language barriers.

For this case, UCA San Ramón that was initially created by cooperatives and for them to grow and apply to training programs as well as grants, had connections big enough to allow the brigades of NGOs to stay in these houses and gather other tourists, using mouth-to-mouth promotion. The communities, in exchange, had to assure the tourists security as well as an inclusive experience for them.

To address the language barriers, the communities created programs where guests could stay and volunteer as English teachers for the communities, focusing on basic communication. This program was promoted with what now is characterized by the three communities as their best tool: social media.



They used social media not only to promote this program but also keep in touch with guests from the brigades. Every program/cooperative has its own website in social networks such as Facebook and twitter and they post weekly updates using computers from Internet cafes in La Garita. These sites also include the price and activities offered in each community and provide a number where people can contact them.

Since they had already hosted guests and other NGO brigades that arrived during the reconstruction period, their validity came from them, but these same guests also made suggestions such as to advertise their offers in sites as booking.com or trivago. The use of these platforms, which are free of cost, also helped them promote community-based tourism and encouraged other communities to do the same.

Social media and validity from previous guests is taken by them as the most important item they had. They linked their projects with tourism by finding one single unique and interesting feature in the communities and highlighting it. Involving the guest in the process makes it attractive for tourists who don't have that opportunity in their own countries and until today, language barriers still exist but they have also been part of the "adventure" they offer; it is safe to say, however, that language barriers for such tourism is camouflaged with Latin-American costumes of communicating using hands and figures.

A final point and something that is worth mentioning here is that using the resources they had in the community made this alternative sustainable. The only reason why tourism has remained as an alternative in which providers don't need to invest a large sum of money in, is because they are only highlighting what they already possess, whether its natural resources such as a wet forest or coffee plantations, or human resources such as families that are welcoming to the guests and teach them about Nicaraguan culture and history.

This process of linking development initiatives with community-based tourism is not only unique but it is also a long one. In some communities this is still under

implementation because Nicaragua's security levels are not high enough for some communities to host guests. Although communities have entire families and cooperatives that work for their collective benefits and a participatory decision-making approach is being used in all of them, robbery and public disturbances are still ongoing in the country and the lack of police officers with mobility is a constraint.

The institute of tourism and other entities does not recognize San Ramón's community-based tourism. Not only do they now offer brochures with the different programs offered in these areas, but they have also helped them in the promotion of annual fairs where discounts in the programs are offered and tourist can go to more than one community during their stay.

#### 10.2. Decision-making from a rural perspective

Making decisions in a rural community is very different than making decisions in an urban society or within a short assembly of a company's board members. Because of its diversity of ideas and the background they have, rural communities in Nicaragua face the challenge of organization. People tend to act apathetic towards local initiatives, they act all as individuals and small businesses that are integrated by more than one individual are usually family-owned businesses.

This behavior has pushed municipal governments and organizations to find alternative ways of approaching the communities. In Nicaragua the government implemented the so-called "Cabinet of the families, community and life" (GFCV due to its name in Spanish). Community leaders that work for the government compose the GFVC and their job is to implement governmental projects and initiatives. Since they ultimately work for the government, they also promote the ideologies of the ruling party amongst the community.

The idea to create GFCV came from the first time the government had to reorganize itself, back in 1972 after the hit of the Managua Earthquake that destroyed the country's capital. Since all of the economic and governmental main offices are located in the capital city, when the earthquake destroyed the buildings and, as a consequence, killed

over 100, the government needed a solution to recover as fast as it could, but turning all its efforts to one single city was not possible in Nicaragua.

So, in order to assist those that needed help without stopping projects that were already being implemented in the other municipalities, they created the “local government committee” which was in charge of reporting the damage in each part of the municipality and provide immediate solution to those whose problems could be solved with the resources they had. Those in charge of these committees were government associated actors that had access to resources civilians didn’t.

The problem was that once the capital city recovered from the earthquake, with the help of the international community, Somoza used these committees to control the communities as he wished. When his government turned into a fully instituted dictatorship with curfew and no freedom of expression, these committees gained power over their communities and people were afraid of them. This ended in the committee’s destruction during the times of the revolution.

Years later, in 2006 when the current party first gained power over the presidency again, they announced the creation of “citizen power council” (CPC) to create a communication channel between government and citizens. People that were related to the party but also had social acceptance also constituted the CPC. Their duties were to promote development, health and security amongst the population and to communicate the community’s needs to the corresponding government institutions, at the same time, they were to serve as emergency responders in times of need.

During the first three years, rural communities worked with CPC as the only governmental representative in their areas. Even though not everyone agreed to their creation, remarking the mistakes of the past, they still responded positively. CPC proved to be a useful tool for all governmental institutions, having one single individual presenting the needs of his/her community was easier than dealing with scattered ideas. Inside the CPC they still had to take decisions as a collective since, unlike Somoza’s

committees, the representative for the community was a group of individuals, not one single person.

Rural communities in Nicaragua are known for having few to no trust in governmental institutions. Because of society-induced behaviors, these communities have declared several times, to feel excluded from the rest of the country. San Ramón is not a stranger to this feeling, the municipal office has had many declarations from people, even in La Garita where the office is located, that complain about the “privileged” some municipalities give to other communities by focusing projects on them.

One of the issues is that in Nicaragua, rural communities have all similar, if not the same, problems. This means that solving such problem in one community gives the other the idea that solution is possible but because of external reasons the government is not helping them. This obviously lead to uncountable protests and manifestations against the CPCs, so much so that for a short period of time in 2010, the government had to eradicate the CPCs and think of new ways to approach rural community’s needs.

Since the idea of having one leader and being able to communicate in a more organized level had become a costume, San Ramón decided that they were going to keep the general idea but with a social perspective. The hope that the CPC would serve as a motivator for communities to designate their own community leaders and find organizational models that worked for them was filled only in San Ramón. Most of the rural communities in Nicaragua stayed with the given leaders the CPC movement had implemented or simply succumbed to the ending of such an organizational initiative.

This fact was proven in 2012 when the government created a similar initiative as the CPC, they had the same mission and vision, but the name implied something different. The GFVC responded not only to the municipal office but also all of the other institutes and ministries in the government. This meant that instead of having a small board, they now had two delegates per institution, making the assembly bigger and diverse. In the

case of San Ramón, however, the municipality explained that the communities already had their own organizational approach.

In El Roblar, for example, cooperatives had proven to be the most suitable approach for them, so they decided whom their leaders were going to be based on the idea of the cooperative movement. They mixed both cooperatives and elected delegates males and females as their representatives. In order to bring up an issue to the municipality or request services from any other institute of ministry, these delegates worked under the same terms they worked in their cooperatives, they consulted every stakeholder, no matter the time, and until they had a definitive number and a solution that everyone was pleased or at least contempt with, they took actions.

The importance here is the simplicity of this initiative, the idea that a rural community that has never been introduced to the “participatory decision making” approach was using it because of the recognition of their own needs. The idea of using a participatory approach to make decisions inside of a rural community where ideas are destined to be scattered and obstacles are bound to appear seems crazy. The craziness does not lie in the use of this approach however, but on the process they used to make decisions and their inspiration for it.

Since cooperatives had already been created, and almost all of the communities in San Ramón have at least two of them, the people noticed that this idea of consulting each other and “forcing” each other to come up with a decision suitable for all was working. The biggest problem had been, and still is in other rural areas of Nicaragua, the aftermath of these decisions. People are unhappy if the outcome doesn’t benefit them directly and this is because they are thinking on an individual level instead of as a collective unit.

San Ramón, specifically in this case these three communities that I introduced in the study, decided to work on their own methods and avoid the implementation of foreign ideas that didn’t answer their real problems. By making decisions in which they all agreed on, the population worked not only in a more organized way, but they also

changed their perspective of things. Positivity through their work was reflected in the acceptance of decisions such as the need to repair an pathway in Los Andes or ask for a grant in El Roblar to build a coffee roaster and even apply for experience exchange programs for guesthouses in La Garita.

All of these activities and decisions, involve the entire community without benefiting all of its inhabitants on a direct way. This participatory approach worked both ways, not only the stakeholders of each project were given a chance to explain the importance of their request, but the community as a collective unit was given the chance to analyze how a small change could eventually benefit the entire population.

The participatory decision making in rural communities approach that San Ramón used, is not based on any specific book or taught by an NGO. The community by itself recognized the strength they had in the cooperatives and used this to implement their own models or organization. Coincidentally, this not only made them organized and more satisfied with the events developing in the community, but it also allowed them to see things on a bigger spectrum: broad view.

La Garita, El Roblar and Los Andes now work with community leaders that represent them to the municipality. The decisions they make, related to community issues and projects, are second by the rest of the community, one leader per family is in the assembly, and they make their decisions based on how they want to move forward from the expected outcome of the case in question. Simple, yet organized and life changing decision making process for a rural community in Nicaragua.

### 10.3. Self-created rural initiatives: promoting rural empowerment

As I mention above, the implementation of participatory-decision making in rural communities makes San Ramón stand out from the rest of the department. This approach, however, was just a complement of a change that happened as a domino effect after the revolution. Working in groups and changing their perspective on the community made it

easier to not only solve the problems but also recognize their possibilities and the resources they had.

While working from an inclusive approach did allow them to work from a broader perspective and develop a vision of the future, they still had to depend on the resources they had. Grants and training programs in Nicaragua are given to organized activities, not necessarily the community as a whole. In order to really be able to work with international organizations without an intermediary in between, they needed to categorize their activities.

El Roblar for example, decided to focus on coffee production with a minor diversification of products. They recognized that their strength, due to the weather and the soil, was the coffee production and in order to have a backup for the season coffee can't be harvested, they also empirically studied their land to start producing corn and red beans. This also promoted the increase of producers. Since they already knew that their community was being recognized and represented by that single crop and they had gained a collective vision of the community, more and more people incorporated coffee into their farms.

The problem was that since these communities were being characterized by one single activity or product, the individual producers were having a hard time marketing their products/programs. If the client didn't agree with one person's price or conditions they could easily find someone else that could negotiate with him. This problem was brought up in all of the communities during their assemblies and it came as an unexpected outcome from the categorization of the communities.

This outcome, in my opinion, was to be expected because of the dynamic of a mono-crop/mono-activity categorization of the communities. The idea of projecting themselves in one single category was not bad, but diversity is what makes development sustainable and this is a lesson that San Ramón learned out of this experience. Inhabitants were complaining in all of the assemblies of the rural communities, and economy was reaching

a state of stagnation, some producers had better luck than others and there was no equitable development.

The singularity about these three communities, however, was the solution they found for this problem. Commonly, in Nicaragua, this is the point where most communities decide to approach the municipality for help or start to develop rivalry between them. El Roblar, La Garita and Los Andes, decided to use the individuality in every one of its inhabitants to diversify their offer. This is a very important detail: the implication of empowerment.

By allowing every individual to create their own programs or their own presentation of their crops and encouraging them to use their own resources as the primary material as well as complementing this initiatives with their personal background was key. Even though the communities had similar backgrounds when it comes to revolution, reconstruction and economic instability, individuals and their stories is what makes every community unique.

Here we are introduced to two different types of self-created initiatives: the implementation of cooperative movements and the appropriation of each individual's project. Beginning with the cooperative movements, the idea of creating these cooperatives, which influenced the use of participatory decision making, was to be more organized and be able to apply to grants and training programs. However, it also became a way of expression of the community.

Cooperatives are more than just a group of people with common interest under the same goal; they are groups of creativity and empowerment. Producers and program providers (in the case of the guesthouses) were always encouraged in their own cooperatives to keep on evolving. The guesthouses in La Garita are, still today, coming up with ideas to entertain their tourists and the first outcome was the dancing group that Ivania created. The initiative is from one single individual but cooperatives work as support group for this individual, which in the case of rural communities in Nicaragua is extremely important.



On the other hand, the appropriation of each individual's project does not only provide empowerment but it is also a motivation for others and one self. Mayra in El Roblar says that once she saw that she was able to fuse her small coffee plantation with the implementation of a guesthouse and the development of a participatory short-term program, she felt as if she had more potential than she thought. From an outsider's point of view, her life might seem hectic but the fact that an individual in a small rural community is using the resources she has to her disposition and believes in herself is more than what can be said even in some urban areas of the country.

Another key element that these self-created development initiatives carried was the ability to recognize the community's resources and what they could do with them. This is fundamental element of community capacity and community-based tourism. It is needed here to remind us, once again, that all of these outcomes and factors that developed along the way in these three communities were not simultaneously nor were they brought to their knowledge by a third party, it was all due to the community's proactivity.

The detail here lays in the empowerment people in rural areas are gaining during the implementation of these projects. The feeling that they can overcome their obstacles and that they don't really need external resources in order to create development initiatives has proven to be the success for San Ramón's sustainable development. Moreover, the combination of these initiatives with the higher self-esteem, sense of empowerment and sense of belonging towards the community develops not only the area by itself but community capacity as well.

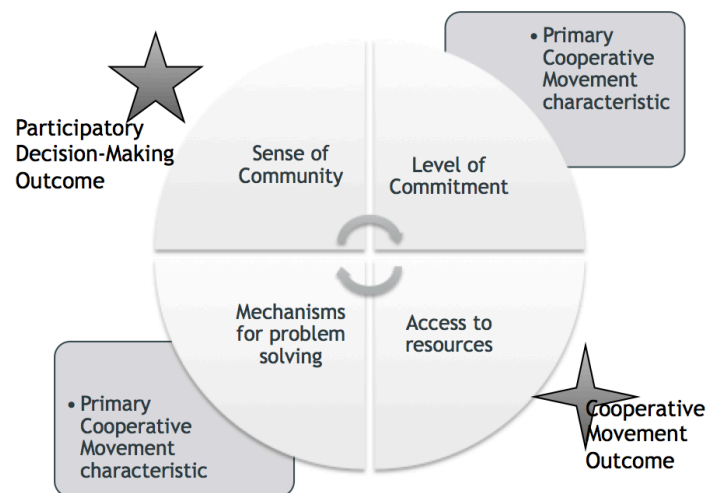
#### 10.4. Increasing community capacity through cooperatives

As I mentioned in the literature review, community capacity is fundamental for rural development. Its improvement and constant growth will determine the sustainability of the initiatives and the potential the community has to acopplate to the constant changes in

society. This capacity can't be measured on a quantitative focus and will obviously change depending on the context of the community.

In San Ramón, every one of the three cases introduces a different approach to community capacity, which makes it hard for me to interpret them as a whole. In order to make it easier to understand, I will use a graph based on the characteristics introduced by Robert Chaskin in his paper *“Defining Community Capacity: A framework and implications from a comprehensive community initiative”* where he suggests that community capacity has four fundamental characteristics: sense of community, a level of commitment among community members, mechanisms of problem solving and access to resources. Although the concept this study uses for community capacity is complemented with Banyai's attributes of community capacity, which present minor differences, for this diagram I will refer solely to Chaskin's characterization.

**Figure 9: Banyai/Chaskin's community capacity attributes**



Source: the author

Using Chaskin's suggestion of the four main characteristics of community capacity, I divided them according to their stage and the involved parties for their fulfillment, at the same time I added the relationship that the cooperative movement and the participatory-decision making process have with them (figure 9).

As show in the diagram, sense of community and level of commitment stands in the same upper level because they are basic first step for a community to increase they capacity and aspire for development. Moreover, they both depend primarily on the stakeholders. The sense of community as well as level of commitment are represented in the people only, the community's environment doesn't affect it directly. If the community manages to overcome their fears and mistrustfulness in each other and oneself, they will eventually gain commitment towards the initiatives being promoted. The previous stated empowerment that increases with the development of initiatives is highly supported by the sense of community, creating this way a lineal relation between them both.

The important part here is that this sense of community promoted the creation of cooperatives in San Ramón. The feeling that they are not single individuals and visualizing themselves as a group united by something more than just interests and creating a bond is outstandingly similar to the feeling they (the people in the three communities here studied) get when being part of a cooperative. Something that turns into more than just work and they become family.

Rural communities in Nicaragua, as I already stated, are recognized because they have their own networks. Families that compose the community usually create these networks; blood bonds directly relates at least 40% of the inhabitants of rural communities in Nicaragua to each other. The sense of community that cooperatives promote and produce is similar to this same bond. In La Garita, Ivania explains that women and men that are no longer part of the CPCPV or ADETOURS are still attached to the members of these two organizations because of the strong friendship they created and the love for their community. Being proud of their roots and feeling the need to promote San Ramón are both common characteristics in these three cases and they all came as a result of the cooperative movement and the sense of community that this created, along with other components of community capacity.

The level of commitment, on the other hand, comes as a direct outcome from the cooperative movement and it is essential for the community's personal growth. The sole creation of diverse initiatives and different approaches for development don't imply the sustainability of it. Communities depend on the commitment their inhabitants have towards their own development.

By introducing cooperatives based on their already performed activities and involving all of the stakeholders in the process, as well as encouraging them to take part of the change in their community (empowerment) assures a level of commitment that San Ramón is proving to be crucial. One of the most important achievements of the communities was to overcome obstacles with their commitment.

It is obvious that rural initiatives, implemented in an environment where people are not trained for the process and the idea that change won't happen from one night to the other. Commitment is the component that allows the communities to overcome this particular obstacle, that in the case of Nicaragua is the main reason behind the ending of cooperatives and overall initiatives. But in this case it was different, the level of commitment the people of these communities had made them persevere and instead of giving up because of one obstacle, they reinvented their initiatives to fit the needs.

On the contrary, both the mechanisms for solving problems and the access to resources are not factors related to the human resources. The resources are given in the area, and since every community is different they all have different resources, which means the means to solve problems and create initiatives that are socially and financially sustainable will also have to be different. Creativity and empowerment are elemental for these two factors to exist.

Starting with the access to resources, which even though the first impression may be the basis of natural resources, refers to natural, human, cultural and even social resources. The strongest resource rural communities in Nicaragua have is their people, and this statement can be second by anyone who has ever been to these communities. The

hospitality factor is of great support for tourism related projects, but the identification of resources will determine what kind of projects they can implement.

Such resources are found both inside and outside of the community and the ability the people have to recognize them and reach them to elaborate their ideas based on what they have as an immediate basis will or not determine the sustainability of the initiative. Whether it's the implementation of one project or the creation of a cooperative, the resources they have are what they depend on.

In Nicaragua, one of the biggest problems is that communities and overall municipalities are implementing projects and generating ideas based on the resources that are provided to them. Once the third party for the project leaves and they are left with their own resources, these initiatives fail and people believe that they are the one to blame on the failure of such project.

This idea always generates a feeling of disappointment in the people, which leads to a lower self-esteem of the collective and ultimately slows or stagnates the community's development. In the case of these three communities, however, the recognition of their resources and exploration of what they could grow as well as the access they had to such resources was the determinant for their success.

In La Hermandad, for example, the access and recognition of the potential the wet forest they had, made the difference. The case of a finca having a natural reserve in its land is not the first one in the country, since the northern area of Nicaragua is composed mainly by mountains, many fincas enclose natural reserves, whether it's forest or lagoon. The decision of what to make of it is what characterizes and defines community capacity.

This case, for example, was also seen in a small community in Rivas, the south side of the country. Pica Pica, the community, hosted a river that crossed in the middle of its land. Since there was no allocation from a single owner, the decision to either declare the river as reserve or let it dry depended on the community. The problem was that since the

community was very discouraged as to their own development and there was no sense of community, the river was left to dry.

The potential a community has when it is able to recognize and access the resources it has increases. At the same time one of the advantages San Ramón has is that this same access to resources is what give the people the sense of belonging in the community. Empowerment is not only about knowing and being able to achieve their goals but to create more goals as the past ones are achieved and that, in the three studied communities, was achievable with the access to resources that came as an outcome of the cooperative movement.

Finally, the mechanisms for problem solving that are a primary characteristic of this same movement. As I mentioned before, it is very common for communities to meet obstacles during the implementation process of cooperatives or general development initiatives. When it comes to cooperatives, problems tend to be related to the initial decision-making process and to the organization of it.

When the people in La Garita started working for the creation of ADETOURS they had several problems as to what kind of treatment guesthouses were going to have with the guests. At the same time, they needed to define the selective activities that were going to be offered to them, in cooperation with other communities; i.e. walking tours, participatory coffee farm tours, etc.

As explained in the chapter dedicated to this community, the gathering with all of the participants and the decision to start a program of exchange of experiences with other communities of the country that already had experience or were starting to implement guesthouse projects was their way of solving these issues. Although it may seem as nothing, creativity for problem solving is part of this component of community capacity.

The idea was to get information from a different perspective. By exchanging stories with other communities and hearing about their way of development they were able to get

information from people who had a different point of view. It is important to remark here that one of the factors that benefit the community for this was that the different point of view came from a third party that: 1. Was not an alien to the idea of the implementation of a cooperative and development initiative in a rural area and 2. Had no interest in benefiting itself from it, so their opinion was not bias.

Solving problems is not only an acquired ability but it also depends on the level of organization the community has. The designation of community leaders, alongside the assistance of political leaders and how well these two work together is one of San Ramón's secrets. The municipality has shown a great disposition to work with the communities' cooperatives and the assistance of UCA San Ramón has also been a great support.

The idea of community capacity increasing through the cooperatives does not rely merely on the conditions that the cases here studied present. The point is that communities created all of these conditions they are not pre-existent. The recognition of their needs, and the development of a system to fulfill those needs are due to their own effort.

#### 10.5. Transition from PNDH to San Ramón's model

San Ramón has created an approach to the PNDH that is unique in the country, they not only have managed to incorporate an environmental component into their approach towards development, but they have also included the stakeholders throughout the process and allow them to be the actual change agents for their communities; giving them the power of decision-making and implementation.

Without knowing it, the initiatives implemented in San Ramón follow the definitions made by scholars on rural development and community based tourism. They took the focus out of the products and the need to generate a greater income and turned it into their people, history and culture. Their aim was to ultimately promote the municipality as

a whole, seeking the benefit of the majority and not only a few, key elements that even Machiavelli in his book “The Prince” assures to be proper of a government.

With all of these different initiatives, the municipality is not only giving communities an opportunity to express themselves but also to prove wrong the idea that rural communities have to reach development using external resources. Instead of working as the implementators and imposing ideas of development to rural communities, they turned themselves into mere facilitators in the process, providing grants and training to the communities in the different fields of their needs.

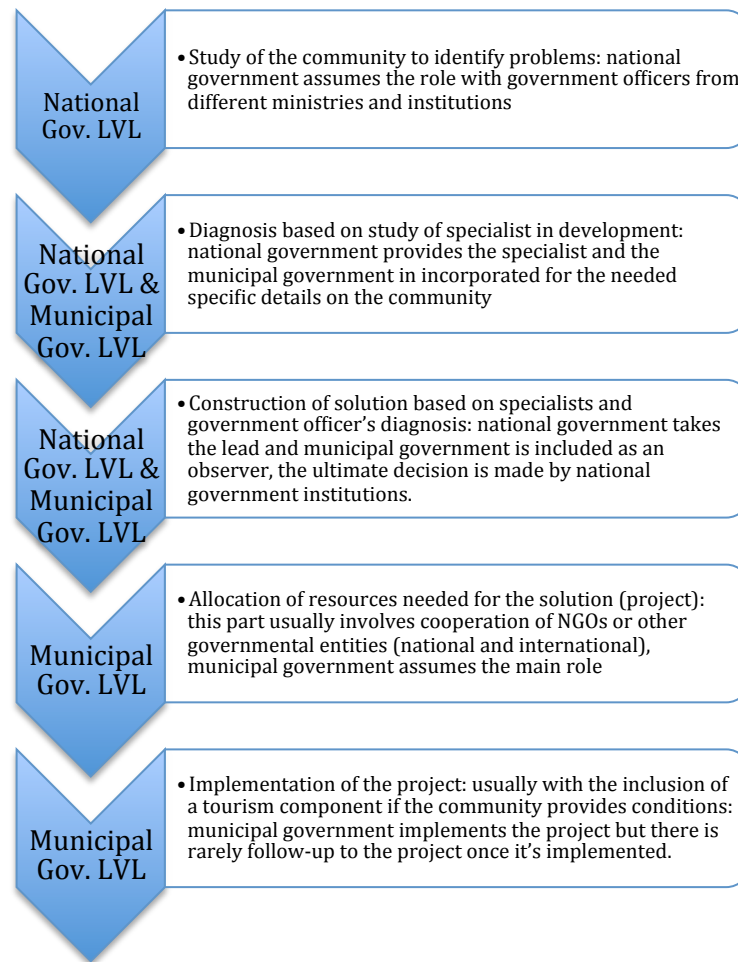
Unlike the model introduced by the PNDH, in San Ramón, communities are using the resources they have in hand. Taking advantage and recognizing the potential of their own resources allows them to create initiatives that besides being sustainable, highlight the importance of promoting local assets for tourism. An outcome of this attribute of San Ramón’s approach to development is the recognition of social leaders by the government and the inclusion of them in meetings and gatherings during the decision-making process and policy implementation.

Figure 10 shows a comparison between the plan for development introduced by the government and the approach San Ramón has. Starting from the recognition of the need for a project, all the way to evaluation and follow-up, the process and key actors are different. Although government is always included, communities have more participation in the model introduced by San Ramón and at the same time, they also are the ones that decided how broad the reach and power municipal government will have in the project.

It is important here to mention that in the case of Nicaragua, governmental policies tend to highlight the most common characteristic of political sciences according to Plato, that states that the government belongs to the and not the other way around; being San Ramón a key example of the result of this premise.



**Figure 10: PNDH model**



PNDH model.  
Source: the author, 2016

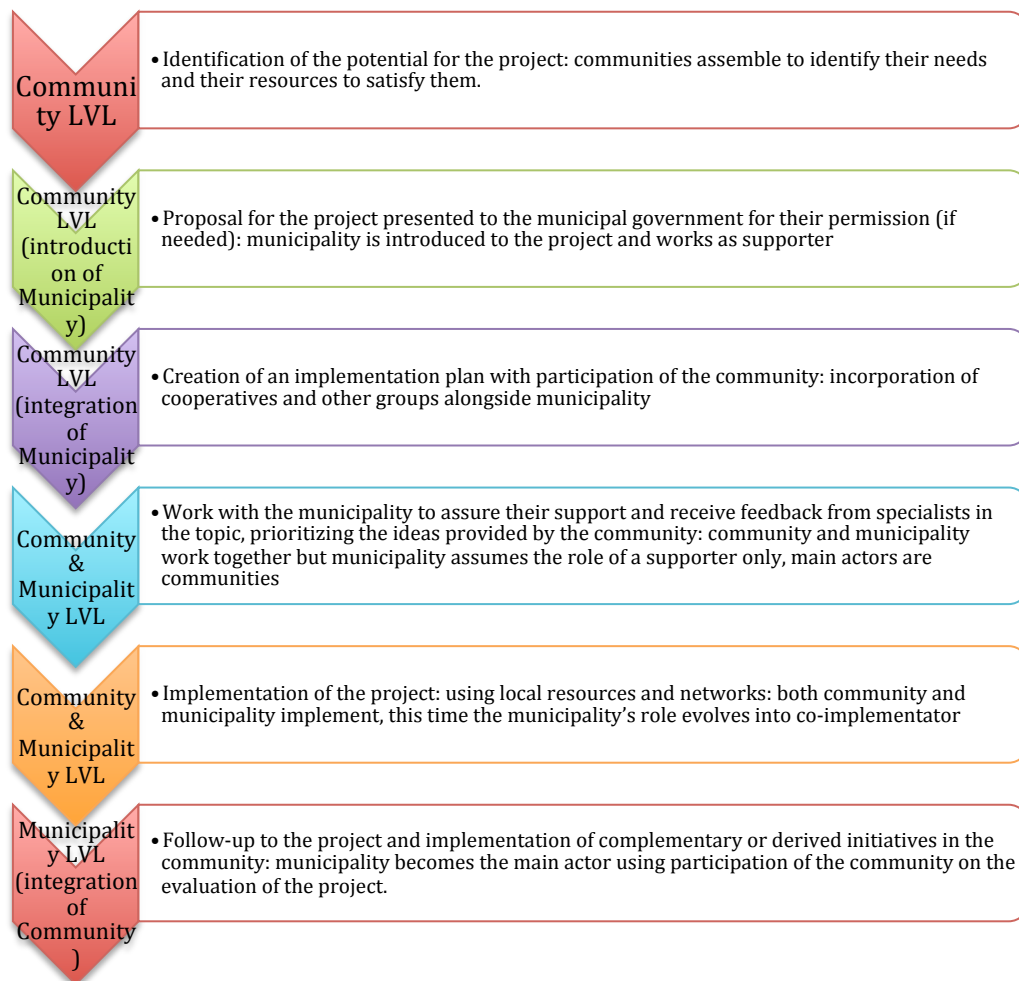
First, the model introduced by the PNDH in chronological order of the common implementation of a development project or initiative in a rural community. The figure describes in detail each step and who is the key actor in each process. Although the outcome can vary depending on both the community and the context, the process tends to be always similar since the PNDH is formulated as a guideline policy and not evaluation or facilitation policy.

The one characteristic the PNDH has that differentiates it from the other policies in the country is that, even though it is a constitutionally approved model, it has gaps that provide communities that are willing-to the opportunity to mold it in order for it to fit

their own needs. The biggest challenge here is that in order to do this is the community needs to be proactive and committed to their goals.

Since the PNDH model is based on the impressions of specialists and external government officers, small initiatives from the community aren't included in the project. This means that the community is rarely or not at all, given the opportunity to develop as main activity and rural communities find it hard to stand out from the rest. This ultimately means that those components that make each community unique get lost along the way.

**Figure 11: San Ramón's model**



San Ramón's model.  
Source: the author, 2016

On the other hand, San Ramón's model is born in the community and the stakeholders are the ones that implement the project and maintain full participation during the entire process (figure 11). The same community decides the involvement of the government and the decisions are taken with the consent of the entire community instead of only part of it. Having a participatory process assures the community's acceptance of the project and avoids possible conflicts along the way.

At the same time, the municipality's work is mainly to provide feedback on the community's ideas and build concepts and ideas based on both empiric and scientific knowledge. What could possibly be the biggest difference between both governmental model (PNDH) and San Ramón's approach is the existence of an evaluation and follow-up process on the project.

In Nicaragua, the biggest problem is the lack of tracing in rural development initiatives, which causes the project, funding and communities to lose motivation. This model allows the community to perform evaluation in order to formulate future projects and not repeat the mistakes done in the first implementation. Parallel to that it also incites the municipal government to assign their officers as follow-up officials and work with the communities.

The constant communication and union between government and society changes the context of San Ramón's approach to the development plan. Without fully disclaiming the PNDH San Ramón's communities read between the lines and adjust the policy for their integer development.

## **XI. Conclusions**

The final chapter introduces the connection between the research and the objectives stated in the first chapter, examining on detail if said objectives were met or not. At the same time it explains the significance of the research for existing initiatives created by both non-governmental actors and governmental sector. Linked to this last stakeholder, this chapter inspects the relationship that this study would have with governmental policies and opposite to that it provides recommendations for further research on the topic.

San Ramón's idea of using community-based tourism in order to create sustainable rural development initiatives has proven to be successful on the mere fact alone that these initiatives have been ongoing and evolving for over 20 years. Not only have they spread to other communities but also diversified. At the same time, communities have shown noticeable improvement because of this model and community capacity has increased as well.

If communities work together and take the lead for their own development, sustainability is easier to achieve. The secret behind this is the trespass of the decision-making process to the hands of the stakeholders and the incorporation of governmental offices as facilitators and not implementators. Equal to this, the community's proactivity is a significant determinant for the success of the project and this can be assured with training programs and inclusive discussions.

Demonstrating to a rural community that they don't need external factors for their development and that empiric knowledge is valuable. The culture and costumes native from each community are what make them unique and that alongside their human resource is their biggest asset. In order to construct community-based tourism the

community needs to exist and that means reconstructing the concept they have of development.

### 11.1. Summary of the Research

In the beginning of this study four main objectives were set in order to keep the study on a single direction. The importance of these objectives lays on the need to give an answer to the community. The construction of the goals for this research was not made by me as an individual, instead of that it's the compilation of the needs and requests the community manifested when I asked what they wanted me to project into the world by sharing the information of their case.

The following are the objectives as stated in the first chapter:

1. To introduce an alternative approach to rural development, in which the community is the key actor of both implementation and evaluation process.
2. To describe main aspects and actions that lead to San Ramón's community-based tourism initiatives.
3. To explore the main characteristics behind San Ramón's successful initiatives.
4. To provide an interpretation of San Ramon's community capacity for the implementation of a sustainable community-based tourism.

To maintain an organized scheme, I will explain how the objectives were tackled one by one in the same order they were presented, meaning that item number one in the following list corresponds to the first objective and successively.

1. In the initial chapters of this research, the data chapters where I describe the cases of El Roblar, La Garita and Los Andes, I introduce the alternative approach each community had to initiate development into their area. In the process of implementation of each approach, the main constant was the leadership of the

community inhabitants. Not only were they the first line of implementation but also the idea for each program came from their own minds. The advantage of this was that those that implemented the projects were not only stakeholders but also connoisseurs of the community. By having someone who knows the area, the people and the resources they have as well as the obstacles that can appear in the process, a sustainable initiative can be implemented. San Ramón allowed its inhabitants to take the lead of the projects and make the changes they thought they needed instead of imposing new initiatives to them.

2. In order to understand the implementation of these initiatives and the repercussion they might have over the population of San Ramón, the reader must first know about the context of each case. The aspects that lead to San Ramón's community-based tourism are more than just the need for an alternative for sustainable tourism. In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, where I analyze the cases and the process, I also highlight the main characteristics of community capacity as well as the self-sufficiency of each cooperative. At the same time, the presentation of each case in the three data chapters make it easier to see the proactivity of each community and the implications that this had.
3. It is one thing to understand and know the characteristics that lead to the implementation of the projects and the implementation of community-based tourism, and another one to look at the main characteristics that make it successful. The use of resources they had, instead of incorporating new ones that weren't available on first hand, as well as the relevance of the community's history and national culture in each project make this easier to become sustainable. Successful in this study refers to the sustainability and inclusiveness of each project, whether it refers to the creation of a cooperative or a non-governmental organization such as CPCPV or ADETOURS. A further look at this aspect can be presented in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, with backup in the literature review chapter, where the basic concepts are defined.

4. Finally, the combination between both development features, the initiatives and the community-based tourism, are interpreted based on community capacity in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter as well. Although some annotations are made in the description of each community, there is more thoroughness in this last chapter. In order to make this type of tourism sustainable without hindering the sustainability of the initiatives I alleged to community capacity as an interpretation tool for the actions taken in San Ramon, highlighting the influence that the cooperative movement and the community's own empowerment had over them.

### 11.2. Implications from the Research

This research holds implications for the analysis of municipal government's implementation of development policies as well as tourism related policies and the networks in the communities and the relationship that they have with the municipal government. Although this study has a merely qualitative analysis and its goals don't imply the formulation of new policies it does change the perspective the reader and myself have over rural communities in San Ramón.

As I mentioned throughout the research extensively, the initiatives and the use of community-based tourism as well as the sole use of local resources make out if these cases an example for other communities in the country. The focus that they have and the highlight of the human resources create the attractiveness that the municipality has to the eyes of tourist. Having said that, the research also possesses implications over the trainings and priority human resources have in rural communities.

#### 11.2.1. Implications for governmental policies

As I mentioned in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of this study, the country profile, Nicaragua has only one guide for all of its development initiatives. The PNDH that is valid until this year. This plan hosts a series of initiatives and provides importance to the human resource in the country as well as education and other factors. It was built based on the UN's

millennium development goals and it aims to regulate all of the development initiatives in the country as well as encourage the creation of more of them in rural areas.

This study shows a new way of development, one that has proven to be successful in the rural areas of the country. The use of the local resources and the focus on the community's people, history and culture changes the method the municipal government is, until now, using the PNDH to support their ongoing projects. Refocusing their projects is a feasible alternative to complement the current projects with the new ones introduced by the communities.

The currently held meetings between leaders and governmental offices in San Ramón can be reinvented into something that includes and promotes more initiatives like the ones in these three communities. At the same time, the improvement of these initiatives is an option to adapt to the current situation of tourists in the country and the constantly changing demand they have.

Not only it will imply an examination to the current policy the municipal government is using, but it also means that overall national government needs a new perspective and examination of the initiatives that are being carried in the rural communities. Examining the communities doesn't mean a short visit to the place but a closer look at the situation and this study is proof of that. At simple sight San Ramón is just like any other municipality in the country but the cases presented here are the result of an extensive investigation.

By generating studies about the communities, in which the community leaders are taken into account, the needs of such community can be defined precisely. The problem now is that the PNDH doesn't contemplate the context in which communities are, but it works from a general basis. Every community is different and that means that policies should be molded according to their needs. Generalization is not a good option when it comes to rural areas of Nicaragua, and this research can hopefully set grounds for extensive research and inclusive reports on rural communities and their current situations.



The government should also evaluate the place and participation it gives to the community leaders designated by society and not political ideology. Communication and participation will work to make the process easier and effective.

On equal manner, the recognition of patterns in successful initiatives will provide a guideline for other prospects. At the same time determining the role of the municipal government in the process and compromising to execute it.

#### 11.2.2. Human Resources Implications

As I mentioned before, part of the biggest assets rural communities in Nicaragua have is the human resources, meaning the people. The biggest problem we have, on the other hand, is that development initiatives rarely focus on training this resource. Although the government and other NGOs do focus on trying to fight illiteracy, training and education doesn't end there. Programs based on what communities need to create sustainable initiatives are not being created.

San Ramón had the support of UCA San Ramón, which provided the necessary training and facilities for education to be a part of the community's life. At the same time, the cooperation with other countries and the invitation of non-governmental international organizations also added to their training for the current success. The problem is that not all communities have organizations such as this one.

This research highlights the importance that education has in the life of a rural community and in the creation of development initiatives. In order to have sustainability we must first have education. Without focusing on the narrow aspect of education, which is the facilitation of primary education and policies that make it mandatory for parents to provide their children with a chance to go to school are not enough, especially in Nicaragua where these policies stipulate that education to be “*at least until the third grade of primary school.*” (Republic of Nicaragua, 2008). This opens the field to families to limit children's education until the third grade, being this case in most rural communities.

One of San Ramón's most exemplary actions is the continuity they gave to education. The clearest example introduced in this study is the creation of a multi-grade school in Los Andes as well as a field-school. The success of the cooperative and the further on implementation of other projects are an outcome of this education. Another outcome is the decrease migration of the area.

With a lack of training for human resources in rural communities, younger people, more and more often, tend to migrate to bigger cities looking for an opportunity to work and provide for their families. The case of La Hermandad, introduced in this study, makes it clear that if education is provided, in which the local activities and their importance are highlighted, there is no need for migration and the values and culture of the people are not lost.

At the same time, we, as a country, need to follow the teachings from our previous leaders. In many occasions before, Nicaragua has heard the speech in which they mention that an educated populace is an independent populace. It took the country several years of war and instability to learn this lesson and even so, education and follow-up to the currently provided is not in our policies.

The cases introduced in this study are an example of what can be done is training is facilitated to the rural communities. Financially speaking, there is no need for a big investment or any other sort of monetary element, but only a follow-up of the currently promoted educational resources. In La Garita, they used exchange programs to gain training of guesthouses and for the case of El Roblar; they relied heavily on empiric knowledge, which, as shown in this research, should also be valued in the academic pensum for rural communities in Nicaragua.

### 11.3. Recommendations for further Research

I have mentioned several times before in this study, Nicaragua needs more diversity in its social research spectrum. The country has a lot of potential in its rural communities but unless we allow these communities to create their own plans for development and invite them to be more than observant stakeholders, the country's developmental path will turn into a cycle of implementing and failing and implementing again. Take for example the culture of participatory evaluation, which is sadly another important component of rural development that we don't appeal to.

Little research has been conducted on the topic of the impact and effectiveness of rural development initiatives created by community-based stakeholders and community-based tourism. With this research I intend to create an ongoing study about this subject. Incentivizing other young researchers to apply similar concepts of studies in other municipalities that have developed similar projects will eventually allow us to design a detailed study about how community-based tourism and rural development initiatives are happening in the country and what we can learn from them.

Because of the on-field limitations and narrative inquiry selection, the thesis introduces limited description of the elements in the municipalities. What is written in the data chapters is not the full scope of the community. Nonetheless it does contribute with a general idea of the elements further research should try notice on the cases it chooses. The identification of patterns in a country where culture is diverse and influences of different civilizations collide is hard to do; so further researchers should consider the implications of an extended field study rather than short-term stays in the field.

Another factor is community capacity that rural communities of Nicaragua introduce; this can present a challenge to a researcher who is not familiar to the area. When I first entered San Ramón I was overwhelmed with the different projects that were offered, starting from walking tours around floral gardens all the way to art workshops with famous painters who lived in the municipality. If the introduced cases are selected

randomly, the researcher may lose the opportunity to study an important case, it is easier and considerably useful to ask the people in the community for recommendations on what to see, what to do and who to talk to. Leaders, who are recognized by the society, are recognized for a reason, the researcher should investigate the reasons why.

#### 11.4. Recommendations for further Development

The hardest part of this research was the analysis of what could be done afterwards, based on these three cases, to avoid the dreaded stagnation of development in rural communities. With these recommendations I don't intend to discard any sort of approach or restructure the current model being used by other communities. The following are just part of my field notes that I believe could and should be taken into account by stakeholders and implementing organizations for a sustainable rural development based on community based tourism in three communities of San Ramón.

First and foremost, the cooperative work should not be limited to exist amongst community members or neighboring communities. In order to create a sustainable approach/ sustainable project, there needs to be constant communication with the government and the stakeholders. Communities and government need to cooperate with each other and leaders should be included in the discussion. When community-elected leaders are part of the planning process, we are able to create alternative approaches based on what the community has determined as a need and assure their support throughout the process.

The case of San Ramón is surely not the only one when it comes to rural development initiatives and the government should make efforts to recognize the different initiatives in the country. Having a spectrum of what is happening in rural communities, however this might be, can help to register successful approaches and determine parameters to establish future development policies. It is needed right now to remind the constant need for more than one single development policy and the possibility of different approaches.

Finally, and because all of my other pointers on development initiatives in rural Nicaragua have been stated previously, trusting communities is a must if we want to really construct a relationship with them. By trust I don't only mean their needs and ideas but also highlight empiric knowledge.

Giving rural communities an opportunity consists on passing them the command, informally speaking, and letting them learn from their own mistakes. Empowering them is an obligation of the entire community and not only government. Nicaragua should stop assuming that in order for us to reach development in rural communities we have to depend on third parties (whether national or international) and recognize the potential local resources have.

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