

Visits made to Research Centres in Nicaragua, Jan/Feb 1990

(What I did on my holidays!)

Paul Marchant.

I spent four weeks in Nicaragua, returning to Britain just before the 25th February election. Whilst there I visited some research centres. For further information of these and other centres, see 'Statistics in Nicaragua' by Steve Simpson, 1987 available from Nicaragua Statistics Fund, 41 Park Crescent, Bradford BD3 0JZ.

Only time will tell how things will change at the research centres as a result of the election outcome.



INIES (Institute Nicaraguense de Investigaciones Economicas y Sociales)

This is an organisation which is independent of the government and is funded by international donations, which can be erratic. Jan Ryan from Britain is working with INIES in Managua, through the CIIR aid agency. I discussed the work with her and her co-workers. INIES has been asked by the government to perform social and economic investigations and assess the impact of policy in order to check its own analyses. It was pointed out that there was not any guarantee that the government would act on these independent conclusions. The institute houses a large library which is being catalogued in computerised form.

There are 6PCs (5 with hard-disks), some of which are a little antiquated. The software used is WordPerfect for wordprocessing, LUCID for spreadsheets, Microsoft Chart and Harvard Graphics for graphical displays and SPSSPC for statistical analysis. One of the crucial needs is to overcome the shortage of printers, and one with a 132 character width would be greatly appreciated.

Hardware faults are a big headache. There used to be someone to fix faults but now there is not and the repair companies which do exist are very expensive.

CIDCA (Centro Investigaciones y Documentacion de la Costa Atlantica)

This is a research organisation established specifically to investigate the Atlantic Coast region; its history, anthropology, economics, etc. etc. (The Atlantic side of the country is very different from the Pacific side in terms of geography and culture. It has a low average density of population.)

CIDCA, although receiving some funds from the Nicaraguan government, is autonomous. It has offices in Bluefields, Puerto Cabezas and Managua, which contains libraries of relevant materials.

I discussed the work of CIDCA with Kristina Tansjo, a Swedish anthropologist. Her project is to investigate the role of women in the local fishing activity.

A major problem faced by the small fishing settlements which are some distance away from the, relatively, major centre of Bluefields, El Bluff and Corn Island, is the inability to transport the fish and seafood catch to market

before it deteriorates. To remedy this, there is a Norwegian proposal to develop fish-processing facilities nearer to the outlying communities. However, a common problem with 'development' projects is that as methods become more 'hi-tec', women tend to be forced out of their traditional roles and become marginalised, thereby changing the social structure of a community. The aim of Kristina's investigation is to discover current practises in order that development aid can be given in a way which minimises social disruption. Much data from a social survey on the communities had been gathered and was to be entered into computerised form for analysis with SPSSPC. (However, no one seemed to be aware of the SPSS Data Entry module).

The CIDCA office in Bluefields has the benefit of an air-conditioned room to house its handful of PCs and printers. This is a great advantage as heat and humidity are powerful enemies of computer hardware. Also, a person is employed as a computer specialist, which is also highly beneficial for the smooth running of the set-up.

Mike Grey, the director of CIDCA in Bluefields, told me of plans to establish a computer repair service in Bluefields to cover all the machines in the town. One of the CIDCA staff, who was currently studying computer science in Managua, would possibly return to set the service up. Help with this project would be appreciated.

Mike also said that assistance with the application of statistical techniques would be valued. CIDCA collects a lot of data but it ends up in reports simply as tables. Very little analysis and interpretation of the data collected is carried out, as the skills for this are lacking. He stressed the necessity of using data effectively in order to plan properly, a matter of great importance in a country which is hard-pressed.

Text books and training materials for statistics and computing would be most welcome (in English is fine). Packages in use are WordPerfect, SPSSPC and Lotus 1-2-3.

UNI (Universidad Nacional de Ingenieria)

I also briefly visited the School of Computing at UNI in Managua and talked with Teresa Ortega Guido. The school houses some pretty flashy Siemens minicomputer hardware and associated terminals. All the kit was donated by West Germany. The hardware made a striking comparison with the home-made tables and chairs in use in the computer suite. (Obviously

furniture was not part of the aid program). The equipment was originally provided to hold the register of electors for the whole country. The data entry for this was performed using several dozen PCs. This must have been no mean task as Nicaragua addresses are located just by directions from a prominent (or not-so-prominent!) landmark and the register contained approaching two million individuals.

Leon University

I wanted to visit the Statistics Department of the University of Leon. I attempted to catch a train from Managua but having waited at the station from 6.45 am to 11.30 am with no train appearing I abandoned my mission, as I was shortly to return to Britain. Transport is something of a problem in Nicaragua! However before leaving I forwarded the letter from the Nicaragua Statistics Fund to the Statistics Department at Leon.

Also I donated packs of floppy disks from the Fund to CIDCA and INIES. These were much appreciated since major items, such as computers, tend to be supplied from an aid programme but it is often essential supplementary material (eg disks, ribbons, paper, office stationery) which is lacking.

On return, I have compiled some training materials and sent them on to INIES and CIDCA.

