

**FIELD NOTES ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT/ COMMUNITY
PROJECTS, EL SALVADOR. MARCH 15-25, 2007**

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1. Permaculture Institute, La Florida (La Libertad) -- Discussion with Karen Inwood, Executive Director, March 17.

The Permaculture Institute currently works with 21 communities (for between 1 and 5 years) to build sustainable communities based on permaculture principles and methods. They consider themselves a grassroots farmers' organization. People come to the Institute having heard about it from friends/neighbors or the team of promoters. The Institute does not go into communities with a project like most NGOs do. They analyze all aspects of a community. They warn farmers they will not bring them anything for free to discourage a culture of dependency. They also make it clear that quitting chemicals will mean more work. As a teaching/educational institute their focus is on demonstration projects not on building things for people, but helping them to identify sources of support. There are other NGOs to help people make a development plan and to get money to implement it.

History

Juan Rojas was working at La Florida in the late 1990s; invited to participate in a conference in Perquín and in a new commission, which still continues. The commission's leaders formed the Institute. K. and J. developed a strategy for the Institute in Oct. 2000.

Facilities

The Institute has a meeting room, dining room, kitchen, M/F bathrooms with 2 showers and 2 composters. There's an office; the Director has an office with 2x2 bunks in it; 3 other bedrooms. A central patio is a shady outside teaching/relaxing spot. Karen's house is round with thick adobe walls, very cool inside. She has piped water. She has used coconut fronds under the corrugated tin roof for extra insulation.

Team

The overall team consists of 9 promoters, a fieldwork coordinator, women's coordinator, a Salvadoran co-director (part time), an accountant, and an assistant administrator. Miguel, the fieldwork coordinator, works 9 hours, 5 days a week. There is also a volunteer biology teacher who is translating materials on deforestation into Spanish.

Teaching Goals and Methods

During the first year, farmers learn a lot and practice a little; from then on they do a lot of practice. The Institute's distinguishing feature is its "farmer to farmer" methodology, first started in Guatemala, then applied in Mexico and Nicaragua, and reborn in El Salvador. Oxfam and other NGOs were instrumental in developing this method.

1) soil conservation—build live barriers and take measures against erosion b/c the best land here is used up.

- 2) teach techniques to improve the land (e.g. make compost with organic matter, phase out chemical fertilizers, plant green manures (alfalfa and clover) and stop “bad habits” like burning and using chemicals.
- 3) give people seeds for green manure. These can be native or hybrid seeds. Trainers show farmers how to select and store seed after the first season. They use semi-botanical herbicides and simple pesticides like garlic and hot chili.

Training at two levels:

- 1) permaculture principles for promoters. They try to explain the reasons for current conditions (e.g. link the fact that a few seed and fertilizer companies dominate the market to globalization and activities of agribusiness).
- 2) permaculture design for community leaders. This includes ecology and politics, teaching on global warming, for example, the effects and history of conventional farming, how this has led to deforestation etc. They take leaders to construction sites of malls and talk about what there was in these areas before and who benefits from the malls. They also go to disaster areas and talk about the political/economic reasons behind so-called “natural” disasters.

Karen teaches these courses with the fieldwork coordinator (who has studied agronomy and has a lot of experience) and a promoter. Leadership training is very much related to permaculture. Promoters are great at micro-level teaching but weaker on macro-level issues. Sometimes they do not have scientific knowledge. They also use drama and “dynamica” games. For example, to demonstrate how the ecosystem works, each person is assigned to be a plant or an animal—a member of the ecosystem. They link everyone with strings. Then one string is cut and this creates a domino effect. They all collapse. They stay on the ground and talk about what happened.

Teaching Materials

There are no good materials on permaculture in Spanish. The Institute is preparing its own materials with the help of agronomists. They have 4-5 modules for these workshops. They try to understand how the farmers learn and link information together. Then they write the teaching materials based on these experiences.

Factors that lead to success

- 1) political awareness of communities and involvement in the continuing struggle for land and rights;
- 2) indigenous communities’ ways of doing things and valuing of a collective spirit;
- 3) “farmer to farmer” methodology; Institute trains promoters in permaculture design and leadership, who then train the farmers. Farmers feel comfortable with the promoters rather than working with technicians who have been educated in universities.
- 4) pulling out of the community if the people do not do what is required;
- 5) The Institute also tries to be as neutral as possible. They are not linked with any faction of the FMLN. People respect them because of this.

Funding sources

Karen mentioned the Methodist Relief and Development Fund (UK) and National Lottery Fund (UK); they fit 3 “lottery” criteria: access to drinking water; improving sanitation; mitigation of disasters.

Water project (funded through UK Lottery)

Assessment

We’re working with 9 communities in different parts of the country. We’re coming to the end of the first year. We’ve done soil analysis and assessment of water sources. The University did tests for chloroform bacteria. Officially permitted levels are less than 1.1; average results were 50; one was 240! People rely on rivers or springs. Many open water sources are contaminated: people wash in them, do laundry, animals shit in them. One community has no toilets and their well is contaminated. There is additional contamination from agro-chemicals, especially pesticides. Two communities are growing cotton though not on huge plantations. Cotton farmers currently use 5 different pesticides. In the past, the entire coastal region of ES was sprayed with DDT. We’ve lost 3 people with kidney failure. Kids have rashes.

Improvements to current water systems

1. Rainwater harvesting-- dig a hole and line it with cement, use a simple hand pump. Also gutters, filters, and tanks need to be built.
2. Improve the quality of the current system e.g. build an enclosed tank around the spring with soil conservation above to stop siltation.
3. Build dry composting latrines.

Women’s Project

This had been a very male project and macho culture was prevalent in the organization. Karen has focused on women and encouraged them to form a women’s group in their communities. In some projects it’s all women. She started by creating home gardens with women. Growing vegetables is a struggle. The seeds are hybrids and one company controls them. In the summer there’s no water. In the winter it’s too wet – plants suffer from bugs and mildew. We focused on a very small area outside the front door – tomatoes, cucumber, chilies, and green peppers -- to improve the nutrition of the family, not sales. We showed women how to build wood-saving stoves. Construction costs are \$6 for the materials (excluding roof and floor). We also made natural shampoos and worked on medicinal plants. We held exchanges, women’s groups meeting together. We’ve never had resources for a women’s project before. Much of what we did with women was spectacularly unsuccessful but they were enthusiastic. They love the stoves and the shampoos. We haven’t solved the problem of the seeds.

Recently they started a women’s project with funding from Methodist church (UK) working with the Women’s Association of Tecoluca. There’s a limit to how much we can expand. We need to identify partners to grow the work. We’ll be teaching promoters. We’ve hired a part-time coordinator who just started, trained as an agronomist in Cuba.

Organizational Culture

It's a new experience for the Institute to work through another organization. Our organizational culture is very different from the norm. This new worker is not used to working in a team or familiar with our "farmer-to-farmer" methodology. We need to work out how to bring in experts and train them in our organizational culture. Also we'll have to convince the Women's Association of our way of working. The way we work is at least as important as what we do.

In the beginning we weren't clear enough about our methodology. Every time we've provided things for people we created problems. People expect it and it leads to dependency. In the beginning stage we focus on the organization of the community. Often there is very little—very little structure, unity, or ability to solve problems. We teach people how to run meetings, do book-keeping, and work with a board of directors (*junta directiva*). We produce packs of training materials.

We work very differently from most NGOs. We've worked alone, building our own capacity. After the war, money flooded in from the European Union and elsewhere to NGOs. What's left? Old failed projects (e.g. the piggery we saw). If only permaculture education had happened after the Peace Accords; but nothing has changed in how people farm. And there's corruption. Many technical people who work for the Institute tell this story. They are amazed at how honest we are.

I network with organizations. There seems to be a good connection but nothing comes of it. There's a competitive NGO culture. It's very divided on political grounds and NGOs are linked to political factions. The social and economic structure before the war, the vertical power structure, is also an obstacle. Everybody was indebted to someone above him or her. Politicians bought votes by giving out favors. Totally disempowering. It still exists but in a subtle form. A faction or a family will line up with a certain NGO. I tell them: permaculture in the Institute belongs to everybody— as a way of breaking with that culture of patronage. We're making some strides with this.

The struggle for land has been intense. People wanted their individual land. The first land reform was an anti-insurgency measure. It broke up the largest holdings and gave them to others. The second land reform was more radical, with some negative effects: limited land-holding size, no resources or technical training. This ensures government control. Most people weren't farmers and didn't know how to farm. La Florida is a coop but only in name. It's individually owned with nothing held in common. They sell coffee collectively but that's about it. There was huge energy in the beginning here. Now, successful coops belong to rich people or have huge support from NGOs.

The culture is based on *families*; self-help and families working together. War drove some community collectivization and also the refugee camps. War zones were in harsher conditions (environmentally): San Vicente, Sochitoto, Morazán, Chalatenango. In the western part of the country people were not involved in the war. La Libertad is a Department of displaced people. We've failed with every community here, a real "hand-out" culture. Where people live has a lot to do with their history and their politics. Half

the population had to move during the war. There's a difference between those who fought, those who were victims, those who left, and those who chose not to be involved.

We're also educating NGOs about needs and refocusing resources in the direction of sustainable development. Some NGOs dump inappropriate resources. After Hurricane Mitch, for example, FUNDAHMER gave one community chemical pesticides and fertilizers. People said: we'll come back to organic methods next season. But it doesn't work like that!

Goals for growth of the Institute

- building demonstration plots
- constructing a bigger building (to be done as a series of workshops)
- educating NGOs, local governments, and the FMLN

With global warming, First World countries will use their resources for their own people. It's an important time to consolidate and expand here while there are resources available.

2. Comunidad de Permacultura, La Florida --Conversation with Juan Rojas, March 17.

Everyone living here was displaced by the war. There are 26 families, 140 people (70%-80% of them under 18); some older people. A 76-year-old woman raised 12 children, even with misery; she has no government pension. They have a small clinic. The well was dug after 2001. Then the earthquake happened and 4 houses collapsed. Three babies were sleeping inside, in hammocks, but their mothers were able to save them. This community is a hamlet. Santa Tecla is a municipality with 11 townships. Townships have 8-11 hamlets under them. Department is La Libertad. The altitude is 710m (about 2,000 feet). Karen's place is higher (820m).

Juan Rojas is a permaculture expert who studied with Bill Mollison in Australia. He came here in 1998 to introduce organic agriculture and other techniques to soften the harsh impact on the soil. He worked under the umbrella of the Christian-based communities network (CEBES?). People invited him to buy a piece of land here. In 2000, Juan met Karen at Findhorn (Scotland) and came here with her in October 2000. That started people going as a permaculture community. They agreed without really grasping what it means. People are trying to recover the land. It takes three years to get it back without using chemicals. J. has planted 17 citrus trees and will plant some new coffee bushes.

The earthquake happened in January 2001, 3 months after Juan and Karen arrived. They tackled emergency work first. Members of the network--Mennonites from US and Canada--offered help. They were already supporting the permaculture program. This reconstruction took 2 years and cost \$75,000. It involved

- Installing an electric mill
- Putting adobe on the road to fill in holes
- Constructing composting latrines
- Making water tank catchments
- Constructing wood-saving stoves
- Turning conventional coffee production into organic production

At the end of 2003 they began to build the Institute.

The communal property was 90 hectares but they do not take care of the land communally any more. Coffee became organic after three years. The Institute gave community members training and tools as part of the “Food for Work Exchange” program. The Institute is their legal tool now. They first leased land from the people. The Interamerican Foundation funded it in 2002. This foundation has worked for 40 years in Latin America. They established the Institute with the goal of teaching permaculture. Land was used collectively but after the transitioning to organic coffee people wanted individual plots. They don’t have time to work the communal land any more. Their plots are too small to do anything much. Perhaps they’ll understand the benefits of collective land use in the future.

Cruz and Amalia, her mother, came here in 1986. “We’d been living in San Vicente. We came with our bare hands, no belongings. We slept on the floor. There were rats. It was very difficult. Now we plant and harvest here. We experienced the cruelty of the war. We stumbled on corpses. We were in the middle of gunfire, also firing from rockets and airplanes. I was pregnant when I had to flee. I went to a camp in Honduras and had the baby there. I managed to come back and looked for my husband who was involved with the guerillas. I lived in a refugee camp in San Salvador run by the Catholic Church. When we came here this was empty land. My husband is here. For 3 years we lived separately. I was responsible for 2 daughters. We have built our lives here since 1992. It’s a better way of life, peaceful, but economically it’s hard. There is crime and gang violence. We prepare the land and grow maize, tomatoes and beans. For subsistence, and some sales at Santa Tecla market. We have a little shop. Very small income. Sometimes I’ve taken work outside. I worked as a domestic for a year in the city, returning home when I had a day off. I have 5 children now. The 2 older ones are in high school.”

Amalia had 8 children. “I had 3 babies at a time –one on the back, one at the breast, and held one by the hand. I suffered no wounds in the war -- Gracias a Dios – but suffered an accident later when an army truck crushed my legs. My knees hurt a lot, especially in cold weather.”

We met Eddie, a single mother living with her father. They grow beans, bananas, coconuts, jack fruit, avocados, papayas etc. They have built a composting toilet and made steps with old tires. They plan to sell part of their land to enlarge their house.

3. Juan Rojas’ Permaculture Demonstration Project

Juan explained permaculture principles to us. 90 % of permaculture is observation: watching where the water comes in, for example. What are the resources and what can be done with them? What are the limitations? Observe to see what is possible. The solution lies in the problem. At his place water comes down the hill in a stream and into a water tank. If too much water is flowing during rainy times we store it in trenches (swales) about 1m deep. Earth stores it. Live barriers planted above the trenches prevent erosion.

The first 3 steps are: measure the slope; manage the water; design permaculture activities. The slope is 22 % on the left and 28 % on the right where the house is.

Permaculture zones depend on how regularly they are used/needed.

Zone 1 is the house, the porch, composting toilet. Water to the bathroom sink runs by gravity, with a 2-inch slope on the pipe. Also the stove, with chimney, is on the porch; a clay tray fits over the fire hole for making tortillas. He served us juice from his oranges and put up a hammock on the shady porch. “This is where I think and get inspiration, watching the land prosper.”

Zone 2 (next to the house for daily use): flowering plants, herbs, medicinal plants, rainy season vegetable garden, passion vine growing on a bamboo structure, two rainwater tanks, and coffee seedlings shaded by the house.

Zone 3 (further from the house): 3 or 4 kinds of oranges including mandarins, lemons, jackfruit, 3 or 4 kinds of guavas, 3 or 4 kinds of bananas, coconuts, pineapples, coffee, avocados, neem, noni (a fruit), cinnamon, firewood trees (from India).

Zone 4 is down by the creek. The creek is dry in the dry season but the land looks green as the water filters downwards.

Zone 5 is forest on the far side of the creek. Only go there for inspiration or ceremony.

Swales run horizontally, along contour lines. The distance between swales is calculated according to the steepness of the slope. He has built up terraces and steps using old tires. Cutting firewood, stacked in piles, and small pegs and stakes to hold terraces in place. November-May is the dry season. It may rain a little but not more than an hour. September is very rainy. The house roof is a rainwater catchment area. Plastic pipes take water from the gutters to water tanks. Soil is fertilized from the composting toilet, the worm box, animal droppings (sheep-goats), organic kitchen waste, and mulch. Mulch also keeps down weeds and stops the soil drying out. Juan uses all the orange peels, coconut fronds, coconut shells, eggshells etc. for mulch. There are piles of mulch everywhere. He uses companion planting principles e.g. tomatoes with carrots but not with onions. He knows every plant, every tree and introduced us to them all individually. Water from an old water tank is used for people’s laundry. He put in plants for insecticide and medicinal uses downstream of the laundry area. They filter soap and bleach out of laundry water, starting with yellow bamboo growing next to the laundry area (and which otherwise he doesn’t have much use for—an imported species that is very invasive. Generally he has dug it out and filled the holes with compost and mulch).

4. Chalatenango Coordinating Committee for Development (CCR—formerly Coordination of Communities and Repopulation). Conversation with Jesse Dyer, Sister City project worker at CRIPDES office, March 16; visit to Chalatenango, March 19.

CCR is a grassroots organization partnered with CRIPDES (Christian Committee for Refugees and the Displaced). It focuses on organizing and training leaders in the electoral

system as well as at grassroots level. Some people go from CCR to become members of parliament for the FMLN. At the CCR Board meeting there were five women and two men representatives. They introduced themselves and their responsibilities.

Esperanza Ortega: “From 1980-84 people had to leave their homes. Some went to San Salvador. If you live far from your home place it’s very difficult. People wanted to return-- refugees from inside and outside the country. During the war even pregnant women and children had to leave this region. We’ve been struggling to legalize ourselves, to have a legal home in our own country. Therefore we saw it as necessary to organize ourselves to carry out our struggle. We demanded to be protected when we returned to our land. I was one of the founders of the first Board of CCR on June 19, 1988 at the National University in San Salvador. This is how the dialogue/negotiation regarding the Peace Accords started. National and international organizations took part in negotiations. After the signing of Peace Accords we started to work on development and formed women’s groups, groups for healthcare, youth affairs, education, and so on.”

Another woman representative: “CCR began with 5 communities and now works with 100 communities, and with more than 40 different women’s groups in these communities. There are 5 representatives on the CCR Board representing 7 regions. In addition there are representatives for areas of work (11 people altogether). This is how we worked in war zones during the war.

Another woman talked about health care: “We have a legally recognized association. We can recognize and use medicinal plants. We make natural medicines; do first aid and physical therapy. We have a community radio program on natural medicine: “How to Cure Ourselves in Our Own Homes.” Health care is poor in El Salvador and hospitals are very bad. There’s a hospital in Chalatenango but patients have to bring their own syringes and antiseptics; hospitals don’t have even such basic things. When patients are checked in they are not treated. The struggle continues to change this reality. We have a lot of experienced health workers because of the war. We want to start a clinic with doctors who are not affiliated with the government hospitals”.

A man emphasizes organization: “There are community boards in 100 communities to maintain levels of organization against threats. For example, there were attempts at mining exploration in Chalatenango. We strengthened our organization to fight it. We try to link the history of our struggle to current events. The attempt at mining exploitation is reviving the history of struggle in defending our land. We want to maintain the consciousness of our people. If we keep our organization intact, no company can come in and do mining. I work with popular education teachers. They learned to teach in the hills when there weren’t any schools. During the war they taught what they knew. They gave classes, wrote on any surface with rocks. Many of us learnt to read and write in such wartime schools. Now things are more formalized. We work with people at all levels but we don’t want them to lose their courage. We update information and pass it to popular education teachers. We did a lot of popular education during the war. After the war we integrated popular education into our schools. Our people should not forget that history.”

Jose, the Director of the Board: “We believe that we will change as necessary and we will survive. We have a very clear reason. Other NGOs come and go but we’re a grassroots organization. We have achieved a lot; therefore we have credibility. Today many communities ask us to work with them. More communities are represented on the Board now. Regional assemblies and people from their Boards work with us”.

CCR has developed its own NGO—CORDES. CORDES focuses on technical assistance, sustainable agriculture and food security. It emphasizes capacity building: meetings, training, traditional dancing (folklorico). Technical support is given for drying fruits with solar energy. Pictures of home gardens, an egg incubator, raising rabbits, the construction of a biodigester, and a drip irrigation system illustrate CORDES’ work. They have “planes de finca” regarding coffee production-- systems for roasting, grinding, and solar-drying. CORDES is working to organize direct exports. At present they don’t have organic certification. They need to get it for each plot separately. This is expensive. There’s a coffee roaster in Madison, WI (Just Coffee) that imports directly. The question is how to keep the money in the lands of the farmers and not the middlemen. CORDES is supporting farmers to get export licenses and negotiating with shipping companies. Giant coffee companies send coyotes to offer instant cash, pesticides and fertilizer etc.

They are growing high quality coffee at 1000m and above. Farmers get about \$1.00-1.40 a pound for raw beans. They’ve formed processing cooperatives for roasting and selling on the local market for \$2.25 per pound. Local people consider this price high. Women are working at the roasting coop. Coffee farmers are men. This way more profit stays in the family. Transport is not easy. They have to carry coffee in the bus for 2 hours.

Small communities surround Chalatenango City. There are local produce markets in each community once a week, but not so successful as people want to go to Chalatenango City for other business – “one-stop shopping.”

Funding

Nowadays, El Salvador has moved off the NGO map for resources—they’ve moved to Africa, Afghanistan etc—so there is more competition for fewer resources. People have to emphasize poverty to get resources—not a healthy game to be playing. The building we visited belongs to CORDES. CCR has one office there. Many foundations would rather fund CORDES than CCR, but CCR does not want to be like CORDES. It focuses on community organizing. Sometimes CCR can’t pay the small Board stipends, and Board members split what there is. Because people are elected by their communities; they make sure they keep going to carry out these responsibilities.

5. Las Vueltas --Conversation with mayor and others, interpreted Jesse Dyer, March 19.

The park, Park of Ovidio Lopez, is named after a civil war leader from Las Vueltas. A sign on the walls: “Heroes and Martires de las Vueltas: Hasta la Victoria Siempre!” A monument in the park says: “Monumento en Homanaje a las combatientes en la lucha por la paz y la libertad”. A bomb that fell in this area during the war is also on display.

A young man explained that the community collectively owns a piece of land (150 he) above the dam that feeds San Salvador. They are trying to get compensation from the government for taking care of the watershed but they have not been successful yet.

They have organized a “caminata”—a 3-day hike in the mountains to honor the war martyrs. They are trying to start eco-historic tourism.

Rosa Cándida, the mayor, mentioned that many people had lost family members and suffered in the war. [People from here fled to Mesa Grande refugee camp in Honduras.]

“Our goals are to strengthen development. We have a small fund from central government plus some help from international NGOs, which we prioritize according to our greatest needs. Each community contributes to infrastructure. This year we’re improving the clinic and education. We need funds for roads and infrastructure. We want to have a high school here. Part of the budget this year will go towards these costs. We are part of La Montaña, protecting the lungs of Chalatenango. We also have a project to improve the water system. We’re planting trees. We want a better solid waste treatment facility. The high school and solid waste are priorities but we don’t have all the resources yet, so we are doing it bit by bit, building for the future. We have a center for children with disabilities but need to expand it. We also want to focus on policies for women, and to strengthen the organization of the community, improve participation. The new community board was elected the other day. 5 out of 9 are women. There is a possibility that we will develop lookouts on the hills as a tourist attraction in the future”.

A man from the Municipality Council: “...Agricultural production is always important. A priority is to diversify agriculture. In the past, we’ve worked on diversifying crops but our experiences with alternative agriculture haven’t been profitable. We’re now emphasizing food security for families. We are sustainable in a subsistence way –beans and corn. We need local markets. We will work with CORDES to improve technology and to get training. Our priorities are to diversify corn and maize. Fertilizers are very costly especially for people who depend on remittances”.

6. San José Las Flores --Conversation with Jesse Dyer, Sister City project worker at CRIPDES office, March 16; visit to San José Las Flores, March 19.

During the war, government forces pursued a scorched earth policy following the adage: “dry the lake to catch the fish.” They burned crops and killed livestock, trying to clear out the whole of Chalatenango. People were forced to flee for their lives, some to refugee camps near San Salvador; others to Honduras, Nicaragua, and the US.

San José Las Flores was one of the first repopulated communities. People returned in 1986; 24 families went from Cailla Real (spelling?) on the outskirts of San Salvador. Repopulation was possible through many negotiations and with the help of the UN and other organizations like the Red Cross and CRIPDES. Religious leaders were also involved. It took 4 days for people to pass through the military checkpoints. They

walked. The military said: “We can’t guarantee people’s safety”. People slept in the church that had been bombed out under a half-torn roof. It was the rainy season.

Once they returned, people couldn’t work alone for security reasons. They were under constant threat from the army. Therefore they all moved together all the time, even when they planted crops and went to the fields. Otherwise they could get killed. Everything there now they’ve done since that time. In the 1993 elections the government declared that no one was living in Chalatenango, that it was a “ghost town” and did not need ballot boxes. But people of Chalatenango organized and came in truckloads to San Salvador to say: “Here we are!” Antagonisms with the government continue because combatants and residents of this region supported FMLN.

San José Las Flores is in the rain shadow on the other side of the mountain from Las Vueltas, so even drier; it is reached by a very bad road. On the wall of the community diner is a mural entitled “Las Mujeres Formentando Desarrollo”, showing coops run by women: the community diner, grocery store, bakery, sewing and weaving workshop, pharmacy, dairy (cream and cheese), and chicken farm. Around the corner is Carnicería la Esperanza.

In the past 2 years, 2 Canadian companies have been trying to explore mining possibilities in the region; 14% of Chalatenango is concessioned to these companies by the government. The people in the communities are engaged in a coordinated struggle to keep their land. They have struggled so hard for their 2 acres. People are saying: “This is worse than the war”. Communities have taken control of the roads and established civilian checkpoints. Mining companies have not been able to get access to these lands since October 2005. San José Las Flores is a leader in this. Signs on the wall of the community restaurant said “!No a la minería, si a la vida!” The communities are well organized; that’s how they’ve kept the mining company out by obstructing the road.

March 19: The community was celebrating the Saint’s Day of San José over the weekend with many free events that attracted a lot of people. People were hanging out in the plaza. One more band is still to play this evening. There’s a great atmosphere – church, town hall, stores, pizza stand, people sitting out, and a youth “scene”.

Sister Leila, who describes herself as “high energy,” is a nun from Nicaragua who helped with the repopulation and stayed on. Cambridge Sister City project was one of the first international groups to intervene, so highly respected here. A delegation from Cambridge came for the 20th anniversary in 2006; this year 7 people will go to Cambridge in June.

After the Peace Accords (1992) the Land Transfer Program (PTT) transferred land to ex-combatants on both sides. The “war of the bullets” is over, but now there is a slow and tough economic war, especially on rural people. The ARENA government has implemented structural adjustment policies. Many state enterprises have been privatized. e.g. FOVIAL is the private company the government contracts to maintain roads. Out-migration continued after 1992. There are more Salvadorans in the US now than before. One-third of the population lives in the US. About 3 million people have left since 1992.

An estimated 500 people leave per day (from the country as a whole, including Chalatenango). Others leave rural areas for cities. Politicians do not support sustainable development and sustainable communities. Migration continues, urbanization is on the rise, and income gaps are growing. The current struggle is for sustainable communities in the face of oppressive government policies. Such communities would provide opportunities for young people, safety, and autonomy. People in FMLN areas have to do everything themselves—e.g. schools, governance structures --with very little government support. CAFTA will make the wealth gap even larger.

CRIPDES was formed to help bring back refugees and repopulate towns. It facilitated Sister City relationships between 1986 and 1992 in Canada and the US. Outsiders were needed to watch the situation, witness atrocities, share stories with people in other countries, and give support. Sister City relationships gave voice to what was happening at an international level. In the US, Cambridge and Madison were the first Sister Cities. Now there are 18; there were more in the past. Some stopped functioning; some formed since the Peace Accords. Their goal now is mutual support. Some emphasize continuities among struggles in El Salvador and the US: governments that don't represent the people; oppressive economic policies; and militarization. Sister Cities have a low budget and only two staff members in ES. 18 Sister City committees in the US send people to a national board, served by one staff person.

After 1992, CRIPDES continued to ensure that the Peace Accords were fulfilled, and reoriented itself to promote community organization. CRIPDES is active in 7 of 14 departments, and 300 communities in 5 regions. Communities elect 5 CRIPDES regional boards. There's a national board of 7. Great emphasis is put on participatory democracy and grassroots social models, recognizing that government structures have not responded to people's needs.

CRIPDES is making efforts to link the anti-mining struggle to foreign stockholders in the companies. Coalitions have formed to expose the reality to stockholders in the US and Canada. Another strategy has been a "Dear Colleague" letter from some US Congress members citing \$462 million in aid to the ES government for development of the northern region of El Salvador. The letter advises ES Congress that they should stop the mining research and explains that the US gave this money to improve the environment, water supplies and tourism, and that mining is not compatible with such efforts.

FMLN was divided into 5 factions each with its own solidarity organization. These groups are working together more closely in the US, especially around opposition to CAFTA. A new coalition (including Voices on the Border, CISPES, SHARE, CRIPDES, Sister Cities) formed: STOP CAFTA! Currently figuring out how to maintain alliances to struggle against underlying systems.

What made San José Las Flores work?

1. Well organized from the start – They stuck together against the efforts of the army to weed out the leaders. They moved together, cultivated crops together.

2. Worked effectively together and continue to work in a cooperative model. They rebuilt houses one by one as a community. Currently they have agricultural cooperatives, and initiatives for women like weaving, sewing, a chicken farm, a restaurant. They feed 200 head of cattle on community land.
3. Worked effectively together as a region. Regional CRIPDES branch networks around common issues. In 1989 when the army fired on them with mortars, saying they were shooting at guerillas, people took Chalatenango City.

Current challenges

- 1) The larger economic/political agenda -- macroeconomic framework of El Salvador. The 14 families who used to own coffee and sugar plantations, now own shopping malls. ES economic policies don't benefit the people, but suck them dry. Potential leaders are going to the US to earn money. Mothers, children and elders wait for remittances. There's a giant gap between rich and poor – the greatest in Central America.
- 2) Activities of the transnational mining companies.
- 3) Unemployment.
- 4) Remittances—a dynamic that is hard to break. 16% of El Salvador's GDP is in remittances. About 1/3 of the population receive them; on average \$140/month. This doesn't go very far for a family of 5 or 7. It supports fast food and other kinds of consumption. Coca Cola, Pizza Hut, Subway, McDonalds. KFC, Wendy's, and Mister Donut are everywhere. They siphon the remittances back to the US.

7. Ecological House, Nahuizalco -- Conversations with Marta Benavides and visits, March 18 and 23.

Nahuizalco is a small town in the western region with stores selling handicrafts—e.g. wickerwork, ceramics, woven mats, wooden furniture, and fabric items dyed with natural dyes – anil (indigo), cochinea (bright pink from cochineal) and a green-yellow color that could be from banana leaves. A large church and outdoor street market nearby-- lettuce, carrots, fat red radishes, green onions, cucumbers, green beans, and chicken. On the Sunday we first visited the church was packed with indigenous people.

The Ecological House serves as a community space, museum/gallery, and meeting room. It offers a demonstration of recycling and reusing materials, and provides (part-time) employment for a couple of people. Others volunteer. It was started about 15 years ago by Marta Benavides, a minister and community worker. She chose this town because it has a high proportion of indigenous people and the most violence.

Every Sunday about 30 older indigenous women (widows) come for lunch. At Christmas and other special days (e.g. Mother's day) there are about 50. Silvia and her mother, Hermana Licha, prepare and serve food, talk to the women and check if they need additional support. Some Sunday afternoons there are sewing classes (two old Singer sewing machines); women also come here to do artwork. There are books for teachers about other cultures. Every room is decorated with artwork, plates, and posters. Marta

has taught workshops about land, water and recycling. The museum is not only for display but for learning, so that people are exposed to new ideas.

A small garden was created out of a former garbage dump. Young people did this as well as Don Sofio, who works at the museum. He made hanging baskets from wire and plastic; also grafted orchids onto a tree trunk. Water bottles are placed on a shelf to heat in the sun for purification.

8. Permaculture farm, outskirts of San Salvador -- Conversations with Marta Benavides and visit, March 21.

This is an older family home on the outskirts of San Salvador, among new houses built since the war. It is 1 *manzana* (2 US acres); other nearby farms have been divided into 11 or 12 pieces so the landowner could maximize the price (“lotification”). During the war guerillas were in the hills. There was bombardment. This house was used by the FMLN. Before the war it was in much better condition. An indigenous family lives here now as caretakers. They have a monthly stipend and free housing. Their ninth child is a tiny baby, 19 days old.

A group of 6-8 students of biology and agriculture come here to put permaculture principles into practice. Their goal is to bring this dry, neglected land back into more productive use, to demonstrate permaculture, and to teach workshops. Roberto, an agriculture student, said: We are in a country that’s ecologically very vulnerable, We want to create a popular university. This is the center to start from.

Marta is helping Roberto by paying his college tuition this year. She wants him to be the director and has promised him a training program in Brazil when he finishes his degree in a year. He participated in a month-long exchange program in Mexico organized by AFSC in a Nahuat community. The community decided what they needed. Each morning the group (60 people) built latrines, floors for houses etc. In the afternoons they taught each other. They made a list of what they could teach; people in the community said what they wanted to learn.

The land slopes steeply to a creek, now dry, and up again on the other side. There are fruit trees, piles of dry leaves. Bottles of water are set in the sun for purification. They need 8 hours of direct sun a day, or else 2 days. Must leave an empty space at the top of the bottle. They should sit on metal or aluminum foil to reflect the sun. The angle doesn’t matter. Citrus, pineapples, chili peppers, aloe and other medicinal plants; young coffee plants grown from seed in bags, in the shade. This area is too hot for coffee but people like to have a little coffee nearby. Chili is used as an insect repellent. There’s a kind of olive, which gives oil for soap and cooking. There are several swales near the house and down the hillside—a medicinal succulent plant is growing along some of them. Marta’s mother had a system of digging holes 1m square to catch and filter water. The whole place is VERY dry. The rain starts at the end of April/early May. It gets hotter towards the end of the dry season. Deciduous trees protect themselves by losing their leaves, so

they don't do photosynthesis in very dry weather. Some green beans (must be being watered); also mangoes, yellow bamboo, edible yucca flower.

Students have rooted cuttings from flowering shrubs and made an inventory of what is here. They have ideas for a seedling nursery, covered sitting/meeting area, kitchen garden near the house with vegetables and herbs (Zone 2). They want a truckload of broken bricks (cheaper) for paths. An open water tank had been used for trash during the war. It's empty, needs some fixing, and, ideally, a roof. In the rainy season the creek waters plants nearby. There's a deep well in the house. Water is hard to find here.

The students are planning to spend time here over Easter as a group, about 12. They have created an environmental group at the university with an office and a computer: Youth for the Environment. Their emphasis is on healing the land, taking care of the soil.

Marta mentioned a man near the Mexico/Guatemala border who taught Roberto and José Miguel for a week. She'd contacted him in case they had difficulty getting through the border for the AFSC gathering. She wants to develop an exchange with him. He knows permaculture and she likes his values. Visas are a problem, however.

9. Museum, Santa Ana – Conversations with Marta Benavides and visit, March 22/23.

A long building with walls painted a very happy, uplifting yellow. It has a few large rooms and a large inner courtyard. There is a dining room, a kitchen, a meeting room and a guest room with two beds in the back. One of the display rooms is dedicated to ecology. Posters emphasize the importance of recycling. Another room is the "global citizen" room. Artwork from many different cultures is on display. The museum is free of charge and open Wednesdays-Fridays (10am-12 and 3-7pm); Saturdays and Sundays (3-7pm).

The goal is to provide a calm space, open people up to new ideas, provide a space for community meetings and events. Three people work here part-time: Silvio, an indigenous man; Frances, whose husband left by her without much income; Osiris (Frances' daughter) who works here in the mornings so she can go to law school.

A group of professional people met there during our visit. They include an accountant, a lawyer, a principal of a public school (Carlos), a public school teacher, a woman (Elida) working on environmental concerns for Min of Health, with older people, and a couple of people attached to Universidad Nacional–Santa Ana campus. 6 men and 3 women. They have big dreams, they said. They are forming an NGO (o.en.he in Spanish) to support disadvantaged communities, mostly rural. They share the rent for an office.

Carlos talked about the solar energy project he'd organized at his school. Now 10 houses and the school have electricity. People use car batteries and recharge them at the school. They last a month. They want to expand to 100 houses. They need solar panels, wiring, batteries, regulators, cables—all imported. They have an engineer from the National University for the technical side. They're applying for tax-exempt status. They have a range of skills and work experience but no clear idea of what they want to do. Elida said

that the Min of Health got resources from the French government to clean up a water supply, which helped people's health.

Also a meeting with law students where Osiris was the spokesperson:

“We are a group of students, the Salvadoran Student Coalition for the ICC. We tell students about it. It is little known in ES. We are educating lawyers too. They don't know about international law. We don't have courses on it. We are developing a program for the National University and hope it will catch on at other universities in this region. Knowing about the ICC is a way of pressing ES government to sign on to it and comply. The government says there are contradictions between the ICC and ES constitution. But Germany and France both signed and ratified it, agreeing to take the necessary steps to harmonize their constitutions with ICC. We are talking in a basic way right now. In our group we have looked at some case studies. We did 5 full days of training here and learned about what kinds of cases can be taken to ICC. There's also a national-level Salvadoran Coalition on the ICC. 2 of the students have participated in this. Generally students do not participate. We get information from the national ICC network on e-mail and study it. We have a lot of information, an electronic library and powerpoint. We're taking a human rights perspective. We watch films and discuss them e.g. Hotel Rwanda, Idi Amin. A longer-term idea is to connect with students across the country and internationally. Our next steps:

1. Develop a feasible program with goals we can accomplish.
2. Work with university students in Santa Ana, testing it on them.
3. Evaluate it to see if people understand it.
4. Cultivate media to get coverage for the program and reach a wider audience.

10. Other projects we glimpsed in passing

Asociación Equipo Maiz, San Salvador. A publishing project for excellent Spanish-language popular education materials: on globalization and on the history, economy, politics, and environment in El Salvador. Funded by European organizations.

Cooperativa de Cafetaleros de San Jose de Majada de R.L. in Juayua, founded in 1966. We stopped briefly for Marta to say hello to people here. Cost for ground coffee was \$2 per pound. Coffee needs some year-round workers + seasonal workers to pick the crop-- November, December, and January.

CEDART – Centro de Desarrollo Artesanal, Nahuizalco, funded by Aid to Artisans and USAID. Has good quality handmade furniture, small jewelry items and tie-dyed fabric.

Expresiones Café and Bookstore, Santa Ana.

Shirley Mármol de Valencia has been running this business for 5 years with her brother and one or two employees. It's a series of linked rooms: 2 café areas, 2 computers with internet access; an exhibition of paintings for sale. The bookstore has space for readings. On April 14 they'll have a health fair with information on women's health, mental health, AIDS, youth at risk etc. They've held 3 peace fairs in the street outside the store on

September 18, World Peace Day; and another one on justice issues. On March 30th Equipo Maiz will do a presentation on their book: What is capitalism?

Hacienda Canada, on the road from Sonsonate to the coast.

This was formerly owned by a big landowner, now a coop. They had financial difficulties and were in debt to the electric company. A Japanese *maquila* wanted to buy land from them. Marta proposed they start a business, trapiches – traditional drinks and snacks with sugar cane; also chicken soup etc. They are in a good location on a busy road and could provide jobs for members. She suggested getting a \$10,000 loan to float the business. Coop members discussed it in their assembly—each family has a member on the coop board. In the end, the young men were against it; they did not want to go into debt. So they sold a piece of land. Ironically, many of the young people have since gone to the US.

11. Other issues

Land reform must address issues of landownership + technical assistance, economic support, everything needed for people to succeed. Most people were not farmers. The government has used land reform as a counter-insurgency measure. Plots were so small and people were concerned about food security. An emphasis on subsistence. Make more money by selling the land.

There's a need for a *national reforestation* program. Some is happening but piecemeal. Coca Cola gives 1 million trees, for example. The government is not interested in a coordinated program.