CONTENTS

Oxfam in Central America 1

Land and poverty 11

Refugees and displaced people 23

Central America: options for the poor 31

Central America at a glance 50

Reading list 55

Photo credits 56

The interviews and conversations quoted in this book were recorded by the author during a field trip to Central America in November 1987.
BELIZE
Capital city — Belmopan
Population (1987) — 156,000
Area (sq. miles) — 8,866
Main religion — Protestant
Ethnic background — Black, Ladino
Income/head (1985) — US$ 1,110
Main exports — Sugar, citrus, bananas
Life expectancy (1985) — 66
Infant mortality/1,000 live births — 40*
Literacy (% 1980) — 93
Population/doctor — n.a.

GUATEMALA
Capital city — Guatemala City
Population (1987) — 8.4 million
Area (sq. miles) — 42,000
Main religion — Catholic
Ethnic background — Indian, Ladino
Income/head (1987) — US$ 950
Main exports — Coffee, cotton, sugar
Life expectancy (1987) — 62
Infant mortality/1,000 live births (1987) — 59
Literacy (% 1985) — 47

EL SALVADOR
Capital city — San Salvador
Population (1987) — 4.9 million
Area (sq. miles) — 8,260
Main religion — Catholic
Ethnic background — Ladino
Main exports — Coffee, cotton, shrimps, sugar
Life expectancy (1987) — 62
Infant mortality/1,000 live births (1987) — 59
Literacy (% 1985) — 67

NICARAGUA
Capital city — Managua
Population (1987) — 3.5 million
Area (sq. miles) — 53,700
Main religion — Catholic
Ethnic background — Ladino, Indian, Black
Income/head (1987) — US$ 830
Main exports — Beef, sugar, coffee, bananas, cotton
Life expectancy (1987) — 63
Infant mortality/1,000 live births (1987) — 62
Literacy (% 1985) — 87
Population/doctor (1984) — 1,500

HONDURAS
Capital city — Tegucigalpa
Population (1987) — 4.7 million
Area (sq. miles) — 43,277
Main religion — Catholic
Ethnic background — Ladino, Indian
Income/head (1987) — US$ 810
Main exports — Bananas, coffee, beef
Life expectancy (1987) — 64
Infant mortality/1,000 live births (1987) — 69
Literacy (% 1980) — 40
Population/doctor (1984) — 1,510

COSTA RICA
Capital city — San José
Population (1987) — 2.7 million
Area (sq. miles) — 19,883
Main religion — Catholic
Ethnic background — Ladino, Black
Income/head (1987) — US$ 1,610
Main exports — Coffee, bananas, cocoa, sugar, beef
Life expectancy (1987) — 74
Infant mortality/1,000 live births (1987) — 18
Literacy (% 1980) — 90
Central America is half a world away, poor, and war-torn. But it does not seem so far away to Pete Maguire and Mary Anderson from Nottingham. Both are builders, and members of the Nottingham-Juigalpa Direct Links Committee. Juigalpa is a town in the province of Chontales in the heart of Nicaragua. At the beginning of 1987 Pete, Mary and four other builders went out to Nicaragua, with help from Oxfam, to teach improved roof-making techniques.

Juan Duarte, head of the Juigalpa civic committee, had told them, “Roofing is hard to come by and expensive. The clay tile for roofing is made in a rustic, traditional way, without modern techniques, and it is not of good quality. Moreover, it can only be made during the dry season, on the banks of the Mayales River which flows on the outskirts of Juigalpa.”

The Nottingham builders did some background research. They found that light pantiles of a kind common in Britain until the middle of the last century would be ideal for local conditions. They discovered a company in Humberside still manufacturing a pantile-making machine, which they shipped out to Juigalpa. While in Juigalpa they helped to set up a tile and brick-making cooperative. Now back in Britain, they hope to bring two members of the cooperative to Humberside for further training.

Throughout Central America communities of poor people want to work to improve their lives. This grassroots activity is what development is all about for Oxfam.

Yet often the hopes and efforts of poor people are overshadowed by disaster.
Oxfam is known for its disaster relief work, but in the words of an Oxfam field worker: “Here in Central America we face three disasters: natural disasters like earthquakes and droughts; the economic disaster of poverty; and the man-made disaster of social conflict and war. This is a prolonged crisis. From earthquake reconstruction to refugee relief, much of our budget is spent on emergency aid. We are struggling to respond to this prolonged disaster in ways that can bring lasting benefit.”

Central America consists of six tiny countries on the narrow and mountainous neck of land connecting North and South America: Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

The Oxfam Central America team has its headquarters in Mexico City, from where it is possible to maintain an overview of the region. Most of its funding is destined for the poorer countries to the south. But even here, in comparatively affluent Mexico, disaster can strike suddenly. In September 1985 an earthquake tore the heart of the city apart. Overnight 30,000 families lost their homes. Oxfam provided aid through Mexican agencies such as Casa y Ciudad (“Home and City”).

Rebuilding the damage from Hurricane Joan that smashed into Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast in October is the latest disaster aid priority in the area. Initially providing roof sheeting and food, Oxfam is now working with the local authorities and people on the first stage of a £250,000 water supply programme. Repairs and chlorination have restored a basic service, while new tanks, pumping and piping will be integrated into the rebuilding of the town of Bluefields. And new wells will be dug in Corn Island and Pearl Lagoon.
In over 25 years of work in Central America, Oxfam has had to provide emergency aid in a string of such natural disasters: Nicaragua (1972), Guatemala (1976), and most recently Mexico (1985) and El Salvador (1986).

But it is not just the geology which is unstable. Central Americans have also had to cope with the man-made disasters of poverty, social tension and war. In El Salvador they speak of the "social earthquake" — a civil war which since 1980 has claimed more than 60,000 lives (30 times more than the 1986 earthquake). There are also armed conflicts of different kinds in Guatemala and Nicaragua, with Costa Rica and Honduras increasingly drawn into the regional turmoil. The active involvement of the United States adds a superpower dimension to the crisis.

### LAND, POVERTY AND CONFLICT

Central America's conflicts have their roots in deep-seated problems of poverty and injustice. Land is the crucial problem. The way the land is divided also divides society. Coffee, cotton, sugar, bananas — these export crops brought new wealth to the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the wealth went only to a few, and created alongside it poverty for the majority. Small farmers lost their lands to the new estates, owned by rich Central Americans or North American fruit companies.

Humberto Lopez, a peasant, explains what life is like for the poor in Honduras — the poorest country in
the Western hemisphere after Haiti. He does not have enough land to live on. Like most Honduran peasants he survives only by hiring himself out as a seasonal labourer on the big export estates. Together with other peasants, he has tried to get land through the National Agrarian Institute (INA) under the terms of an agrarian reform which has been on the statute book for several years.

"The landowner owns six million acres throughout Honduras. All the peasants live around the edge of this land. It's been impossible to get the government to break up the large landholdings. We tried for years through INA but to no effect.

Eventually we decided the only thing we could do was to move onto the land. We asked INA for the land with a legal document. But the process is terribly slow. Given the delays many groups felt they couldn't wait any longer and started to plant. It was always on abandoned land. Sometimes we were on the land for one or two months. The crops would be showing, and our hopes high. Then the landowners would move in cattle and destroy what had been cultivated. This really angered and frustrated the peasants. Many people were arrested. Now security forces and hired thugs are guarding the land. We were accused of being communists and subversives. If they jail you for this it means you never get out."

El Salvador's civil war was spawned by the same kinds of conditions. Election frauds in the 1970s blocked parliamentary change, and demonstrators and strikers were fired on. Many people turned to the guerrillas for an answer. Civil war broke out in 1980. In Nicaragua a rebellion in 1979 led by the Sandinista Liberation Front toppled the 43-year dictatorship of the Somoza family. But peace lasted for only a year. In 1980 elements of Somoza's National Guard, with covert US funding, began to organize the contra war, trying to turn back the clock. In Guatemala, the guerrilla war, though less intense than in El Salvador, has lasted longer — since the 1960s.
FRANCISCO, TENANCINGO, EL SALVADOR

Tenancingo is the town that came back to life again. Caught in the middle of El Salvador’s eight-year civil war, it became a ghost town in 1983 after it was bombed by the airforce during a heavy clash with guerrillas. But during 1987, 2,000 people returned to rebuild their town.

Francisco is a peasant, farming a small plot on the outskirts of the Salvadorean market town. “Things are getting better”, he says. “Little by little people are coming back.” The bus has started to run again from the capital. The school has 200 children enrolled. The artisans who once made this town the country’s main supplier of straw hats are back at work. Agricultural production, the lifeblood of the community, is on the rise: “This year we harvested twice as much as last year”, says Francisco.

But Francisco’s fields are still a war zone. One of his neighbours lost a cow as he led it out to pasture: it stepped on a landmine. “We have always been afraid since 1983”, says Francisco. “We are always afraid: there could be another tragedy.”

Tenancingo is supposed to be a neutral zone. The Catholic Church won agreement from army and guerrillas to respect the town’s neutrality. But this status is precarious and has been violated by both sides.

Financial support from European governments (including Britain) and from agencies like Oxfam keeps the international spotlight on Tenancingo, and may prove crucial in defending the town’s continued right to survival.

OXFAM PROJECT ELS 045
£23,606 (project completed)

Central America’s turmoil has produced a massive and tragic migration. Around a million people have left their homes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua to seek refuge in nearby countries. Another million are internal refugees in their own countries — displaced people. Here too Oxfam has responded. Immediate relief aid has gone to refugees and displaced people, and other programmes have helped refugees to cope with exile and prepare for the day when they can return to their homes. At the same time some Nicaraguans and Salvadoreans have been helped to return to their homes and rebuild their lives. Tenancingo is one example.

Tenancingo has encouraged other peasant farmers, displaced by the war, to return to their villages. To do this they have often had to brave the displeasure of the army, which treats them as guerrilla sympathizers, and has aimed to drain the war zones of their civilian population.

In Nicaragua too, as contra raids increased in 1981, the government moved people out of the war zones. In some cases people went voluntarily, to areas where they could be better defended. But others, like the Miskito Indians of the Atlantic coast, did not want to leave their land and their homes. Half the population of the coast, long cut off from the rest of Nicaragua, is made up of Indians and of black people from the Caribbean — different in culture, race and language from the rest of the country. They
wanted recognition of their different way of life. Thousands fled across the border to Honduras. Some joined the contras.

The Sandinista government in 1985 publicly admitted that they had made a mistake and that they had not understood the aspirations of the coastal people. Discussions began which in 1987 culminated in

autonomy statutes which give the Atlantic coast provinces a measure of self-government within the framework of the Nicaraguan state. Amnesty was offered to people who had taken up arms, and people who had been resettled were allowed to return home. Oxfam has been supporting the rebuilding of homes and communities here.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The war in Nicaragua has cost 43,000 lives. The Nicaraguans say that the threat that has won them so many powerful enemies is “the threat of a good example”. Their opponents charge that they are trying to establish a communist model. They reply by pointing to their mixed economy and say that all they aim for is to make the economy serve the needs of the majority. Oxfam’s experience, as a development agency committed to working with the poorest of the poor, is that Nicaragua offers the opportunity of supporting grassroots community projects within the government’s national development policy.
VERA, NICARAGUA

In April 1979 Dr Alejandro Davila Bolanos was killed by President Somoza’s National Guard while operating in the hospital in the town of Esteli. With him went a wealth of knowledge of traditional healing and the use of herbs. But now his pioneering interest in popular medicine is catching on in post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

The leading research centre is, appropriately, in Esteli. Called Rescate de la Medicina Popular (“Rescue of Popular Medicine”), it is rediscovering and propagating popular knowledge. Vera Berstein, national coordinator of the project at the Ministry of Health, explains: “The project has two origins. One, to know our roots; to discover what our people know in the way of popular medicine. Second, economic necessity. Because of the economic blockade which the United States has imposed on Nicaragua, and because of the war itself, medicine is scarce. We have to look for a local alternative; and this is popular knowledge.”

The Rescate team sent 850 students into the villages to ask the peasants what they knew about traditional plants. They conducted almost 19,000 interviews. So far Rescate has drawn up a list of 321 plants in current use, of which 72 were seen as meritng further investigation. Follow-up research narrowed this down to 33. The first clinical trials have been performed on one plant, camomile, in the treatment of diarrhoea, the most common cause of death in children.

OXFAM PROJECT NIC 620
£13,911

In the other countries of Central America, opportunities for development work are on a smaller scale. Nevertheless, people find ways, even in the midst of poverty and war, to improve their lives. These are the kinds of initiatives that Oxfam is supporting. In Guatemala, for example, Oxfam is funding community efforts to improve the water supply.
CLARA AND PEDRO,
NORTHWEST GUATEMALA

In the cool central courtyard of her house Clara sits on a small wooden stool nursing her newborn baby. In the concrete sink, under a gleaming new tap, the baby clothes are soaking. "I am very happy with the tap", says Clara. "Before I had to walk an hour to the river and an hour back to get water, to wash clothes and so on. Now I can do it here."

Clean and inexpensive water is a rarity in Guatemala's highlands. Only one village in ten has safe drinking water. Half of all rural children die before the age of five from diseases caused by poor sanitation.

Pedro, at 26 a leader of the community, explains that they had tried for eight years to get a water supply installed. Then in 1987 they made contact with Agua del Pueblo ("Village Water"), a Guatemalan agency supported by Oxfam. Five months later they had water.

Agua del Pueblo insists on community involvement in the installation of water supplies, as the best guarantee that the system will be kept functioning. A survey of the land identified a mountain stream 12 kilometres away, from which enough clean water could be brought. The community supplied labour and some materials, every family paying about £6 for its standpipe. Six people were given elementary plumbers' training, so that the community can do its own basic repairs.

By the beginning of 1988 every house had its own standpipe. Pedro has even run an extra pipe up the wall in the corner of his courtyard and attached a punctured can to it to make a shower. He turns it on and off several times to demonstrate. "We have done practically all of it ourselves", he says.
If development is to mean anything it has to mean something especially for the poor.

**CHOICE FOR THE FUTURE**

In the words of a worker for a Central American development agency: “If development is to mean anything it has to mean something especially for the poor. It has to give the poor more control over their lives; more choice in their future.”

While the region is racked by armed conflicts, which are themselves complicated by superpower involvement, this is difficult to achieve. Central America needs peace in order to develop. And peace remains elusive, despite efforts at negotiation within the region and within the larger Latin American context. For Oxfam, this has meant spending a large part of its Central American budget on humanitarian aid and patch-up jobs, rather than on long-term development.

Yet despite these difficulties, Francisco has been able to begin life again in Tenancingo, even though it is a war zone. People like Jorge, Clara and Pedro have discovered what they can achieve through their own resources when their communities act together. And Vera’s work in Rescate reveals the hidden resources of popular knowledge.

When peace finally comes, it will come through the efforts of the people of Central America themselves. But in the meantime, working alongside these brave and resourceful people, Oxfam has continued to find ways of making a difference.
LAND AND POVERTY IN CENTRAL AMERICA
Central America is poor. The average Central American earns less than £550 a year. And Honduras is the poorest of all. The average Honduran earns only £400 a year. Most Hondurans earn much less. Honduras, in fact, is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere. Only Haiti is poorer.

Oxfam is trying to support initiatives which help people to overcome the worst effects of their poverty.
PROJECT PROFILE

INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT IN HONDURAS

In the remote and mountainous south-east of Honduras lie the provinces of Valle and Choluteca. Here 2,000 farmers are involved in a programme of "integrated rural development", supported by Oxfam.

The two provinces are at least a day's ride by landrover on dirt roads from the capital — more on horseback. They are among the country's poorest provinces. Arid and drought-stricken for most of the year, they suffer short periods of torrential rain and flood. In these conditions the people cannot grow enough food to feed themselves. Many peasants have to migrate to other parts of the country looking for seasonal work as plantation labourers at harvest time. After the drought of 1986, almost three quarters of the population were estimated to be suffering malnutrition.

The Honduran Christian Development Commission (CCD), which organizes the programme in 14 isolated communities, believes that economic development cannot be separated from social and spiritual development. They call their approach "integrated development".

"Education is the glue which holds together all the other component processes of development", say the CCD. Training for community self-management, leadership skills and organization allows the community to identify, analyse and solve its own problems.

CCD has fostered improved health care and sanitation. Gradually changes have been made, improving grain and cattle production, and hence nutrition. From these beginnings, the communities are now making new proposals that need irrigation and grain storage facilities. These developments have been possible because each advance has been prepared and is rooted solidly in the community.

OXFAM PROJECT HON 057
£5,998

ROOTS OF POVERTY

Throughout Central America, the way the land is divided also divides society. The original Indian inhabitants believed the land was for everybody's use: to them private ownership of the land was as absurd an idea as private ownership of the sky. The Spanish conquest divided the land between large estates, known as latifundias, and tiny subsistence farms, known as minifundias.

After independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, the land-squeeze got worse. A handful of families became enormously wealthy, growing coffee, cotton, sugar and bananas. To grow these new export crops, landowners turned many small farmers off their land. Subsistence farmers became landless labourers. Export wealth grew alongside increasing poverty.
The grain of gold

In December the air in El Salvador smells sickly sweet — the characteristic odour of coffee beans being processed. The Salvadorean economic elite made their fortunes in the last century, growing coffee on the rich volcanic hillside land that had been farmed by the peasant communities. They call coffee the "grain of gold". Yet the grain has been bitter for the migrant pickers who fill the roads to the plantations at harvest time in November. Men, women and small children, they are paid by the sackful — a few pence a pound. In this, the most densely populated country in Central America, the land they need to grow maize and beans is planted instead with coffee for the breakfast tables of North America and Europe. Small farming is disappearing as a way of life.

The concentration of land in fewer and fewer hands occurred also in Honduras and Guatemala. Giant fruit companies from the United States swallowed up vast tracts of land to grow bananas. In Guatemala a local coffee elite developed too; in Honduras the fruit companies reigned supreme.

Green gold

The road from hot and sticky San Pedro Sula, through Honduras' agricultural heartland, is lined with banana trees which stretch endlessly across the coastal lowlands. The road runs to the port and railhead of Tela, built by the US company United Brands in the last century, when Honduras was the prototype “banana republic”. Today the US companies have sold up to local landowners. But foreign companies still dominate marketing and fix prices. Conditions remain bad for the rural poor. In one-room shacks, unemployed farmworkers wait out the heat of the days until the next harvest season. During the harvest, banana workers labour from dawn to dusk cutting the bunches of “green gold”; at night they find it difficult to sleep because of the burning sensation on their skin caused by heavy use of pesticides.

(Adapted from Dollars and Dictators, Zed Press, London, 1983)
"It was a simple equation", comments one aid worker. "Landlessness created poverty. Poverty bred discontent. The rich created armies to keep discontent in check and safeguard their interests. There you have it. All the seeds of civil war."

Military strongmen arose to cement the division of wealth. The wars and conflicts that plague Central America today have their roots in this desperate poverty and the lack of parliamentary redress.

Only two countries escaped this pattern: Belize, which as a British colony did not have the opportunity to chart its own course until independence in 1981; and Costa Rica, where the early settlers established middle-sized farms, creating a large middle class who fostered constitutional democracy.

Today, the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala face insurgency by guerrilla forces mainly recruited from poor peasants. "For the poor", says a Salvadorean cooperative organization FUNPROCOOP, "the conditions of life worsen every day, since the largest part of the national budget goes to financing the war which has caused so much pain to the Salvadorean people".

In Nicaragua, a popular uprising in 1979 led by the Sandinista Liberation Front overthrew the dynasty of the Somoza family who for almost half a century had ruled the country as a personal fiefdom. The holdings of the Somoza clique alone included almost one quarter of the country's cultivable land.

War is a further drain on already vulnerable economies. Over half of El Salvador's national budget goes to pay for the civil war. Nicaragua too spends over half its budget fighting the contras, rebels led by ex-members of Somoza's National Guard.
In 1978 the average US citizen was eating almost ten times more meat than the average Honduran. Central Americans have been made poor: their poverty is not simply a scarcity of resources. As Central America modernized and entered the world market, on terms dictated by the rich consumer countries, the poor have been the losers.

**El Big Mac . . .**

- Most Americans as they munch their hamburgers are unaware that they are at the end of a food chain that is fast destroying Central America's rainforests. To feed the booming beef market in the United States, some two-thirds of the Central American forests have been chopped down for cattle ranching. At the same time, Central America has become more and more dependent on food imports. In 1978 the average US citizen was eating 123 pounds of beef a year. According to the Resource Centre based in New Mexico, this was three and a half times more beef than the average Costa Rican ate that year, over five times more than the average Guatemalan, eight times more than the average Salvadorean, and almost ten times more than the average Honduran.
and chips

Open up the back of a calculator and, if the silicon chips are not made in the Far East, the chances are that they will say “made in El Salvador”. Companies from the USA, attracted by wage costs one-tenth of those at home, assemble components for re-export to the US. Coca Cola, Levi Strauss jeans, Maidenform bras, and Gillette razors are among other familiar products that are manufactured in El Salvador and Guatemala. In the 1960s Central America tried to cut its import bill by manufacturing more locally. But the market was too small because most people were too poor — a classic vicious circle. So in the 1970s, Central America turned from import substitution to “labour substitution”, trying to tempt firms away from the United States. There have been few benefits for the poor. Wages are low and industrialization has not kept pace with the need for jobs, as the expansion and mechanization of export agriculture throws more and more people off the land.

LAND REFORM IN NICARAGUA

Nicaraguans since 1979, despite the difficulty of the contra war, have experimented with a different approach to development. The new Sandinista government introduced education and health programmes, mobilizing the enthusiasm of whole communities in a literacy crusade and mass vaccination campaigns. The way the crucial land problem was tackled shows the role of ordinary people in shaping policy.

The Sandinistas wanted to create a mixed economy of peasant cooperatives alongside large private export-oriented estates. Peasants who wanted their own plots of land were not catered for in a 1981 land reform, which formed cooperatives on unused land and land that had belonged to the Somoza family. The outcry forced the government to rethink. In 1984 the reform was extended to include the right to individual plots of land.
A PEASANT COOPERATIVE
IN NICARAGUA

Rosalio is a member of UNAG. He is a leader of the Fanor Urroz cooperative in San Francisco Libre, 44 miles north of the Nicaraguan capital, Managua. Under Somoza neither he nor his neighbours had any land. They worked as agricultural labourers. Then in 1985 they got 164 acres under the land reform to create the Fanor Urroz cooperative. The land is next to a river, ideal for irrigation.

The 15 members of the cooperative, ten men and five women, set to work with a will, intending to raise cattle, vegetables and basic grains. They got a bank loan to buy cattle, seed and fertilizers.

But then problems set in. Under pressure of the contra war and a US economic blockade, the value of the national currency plummeted and the price of imports like fertilizers soared. Rosalio asked Oxfam for help to buy more cattle and a motor for irrigation. The cooperative cleared land for pasture and planted melons and tomatoes.

Again crisis struck when shortage of US dollars delayed importing the pump. The cooperative paid a high price for the delay as the rains failed throughout Central America in 1987. The maize, which forms a staple food and which should have been ripening in November, withered within yards of the river water that could have irrigated it.

On top of everything else several members of the cooperative, all of whom are in the militia, have been sent to the war areas. “We don’t like it. All we want to do is work our land”, says Rosalio. “But we have to defend our country, otherwise we’ll never be able to develop the cooperative and solve the economic problems we face.”

The national organization of small peasants, UNAG, is one of the links between the peasant community and government policy. It has become one of Oxfam’s main project partners.

Without land reform, cooperatives can offer only partial solutions to a poverty born of land-hunger. In the past, some Central American governments promoted cooperatives as a way of buying-off discontent and rewarding supporters. At best, they can help to pool scarce resources of land, equipment and technology.

In El Salvador, where pressure on the land is most acute, more and more of the poor, rural and urban, are joining cooperatives. A government land reform in 1980 affected only 15 per cent of the rural poor. For the rest the situation remains desperate. “Traditionally”, say FUNPROCOOP (the Salvadorean Cooperative Promotion Federation), “credit and technical assistance have been the privilege of the great landowners”.

Oxfam has supported FUNPROCOOP, the training arm of the cooperative movement, since 1983. As the economy has deteriorated in recent years, the cooperative movement has grown to include four federations and 364 cooperatives.
A MODEL FARM IN EL SALVADOR

The Chacalayo training school for El Salvador’s agricultural cooperatives believes in learning by doing. That is why it is located on a 395-acre model farm. The students are helping to modernize the farm after seven years of war-induced neglect. The school run by FUNPROCOOP trained many of the peasant leaders in the 1970s. Closed down since by the civil war, it reopened in April 1987 with help from Oxfam.

Appropriately the ribbon was cut cooperatively. One hundred representatives of diplomatic missions, of international aid agencies and Salvadoran institutions each snipped off a piece and pinned it to their lapel. “It is a rebirth”, said one guest. Everyone was aware that reopening the school was a bold step. It lies in the northern province of Chalatenango, which has been the site of major conflict. The school itself has received several visits from army patrols and the police since its reopening.

The first 60 students, selected by their cooperatives, arrived in April 1987 for a 90-day course. The school aims to train 510 cooperative leaders by 1990. They will form a network of promoters and leaders, who in turn can develop educational work in their communities, strengthening the membership and the institutions of the cooperative movement. FUNPROCOOP stresses the selection of women, many of whom have lost their menfolk as a result of political violence, and now head households.

Basic courses cover farming technology, non-traditional crops such as vegetable gardening, animal rearing, health, nutrition, social organization and cooperativism. There are also more specialized courses in cooperative administration and accountancy. A beneficiary of FUNPROCOOP training, Edgardo, says: “What I like most is the training in cooperativism. Before if someone had a problem it was their problem. Now we all work together.”

Oxfam Project ELS 053
£70,921
A MAGAZINE FOR HONDURAN PEASANT FARMERS

In January 1987 the first issues of a new magazine began to pass from hand to hand among the poor peasants of Honduras. In this country only one rural person in five can read and write. Many picking up “Agraria” could only marvel at something they had never seen before in a Honduran publication — photographs of peasants, just like themselves. Others were able to read the articles on the history of the Honduran peasant movement, on the uses of natural fertilizers, and on the health risks of pesticides. Most talked about was the short story about the life of a peasant family.

Until “Agraria” appeared, the only magazine aimed at farmers was “El Agriculor”, a lavish publication aimed at middle-class farmers and cattle ranchers.

“Agraria” tries to offer poor peasants and agricultural labourers a chance to speak. And in return it provides them with information about their rights. Its publishers, the Honduran Institute of Rural Development (IHDER), say it is “a simple but important support to the understanding of Honduran agrarian reality”.

THE HONDURAN PEASANT MOVEMENT

In Honduras too, land reform has been decreed but not fully implemented. Small plots of land are handed out slowly and piecemeal, often with purchase costs that saddle the new owners with heavy debts. Some peasant groups have braved jail or violence or both to move land-hungry people onto unused land. Improved communication among peasant communities can help to make the options clearer. Oxfam is helping here.
The Guatemalan Catholic diocese of Quetzaltenango published a pastoral plan for 1985-1988. Its description of social problems could apply to much of Central America: "At national level an economic model is in force which generates poverty and crisis, manifested in the unjust distribution of land, of raw materials, in badly paid labour, in devaluation of the currency and in all the forms of underemployment and unemployment . . . ."

At the time this was written the official minimum wage in Guatemala was about 75p a day. Most people were lucky if they made half this much. Half the workforce in Quetzaltenango province were unemployed. Whole families were migrating to the capital, to Mexico or to the United States. A 1980 study by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) of the Guatemalan highlands said that "nine out of ten people were living on plots of land too small to provide income sufficient to meet their basic needs".

Land reform would be one major step towards defusing social tensions, expanding domestic markets and unlocking the development potential of Central America's people. For the present, Oxfam continues to support efforts by the poor to do better than survive.
People find ways, even in the midst of poverty, to improve their lives.
REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PEOPLE IN CENTRAL AMERICA
Claudia shades her eyes from the sun as she looks up, over the mountains of her nearby homeland and into the sky. Like all the Salvadorean refugees in this camp just across the border in Honduras, she has become adept at listening for the noises of planes. Far up, against the sun, a light plane buzzes. In the war zones of El Salvador, where government forces and guerrillas battle, a plane overhead may mean death by rocket, bomb or machine gun. Here in Honduras the refugees can only watch and listen as airforce bombs pound what were once their homes. Claudia shrugs and turns away. This plane is just a spotter.

She says: “Yesterday and today we could hear the bombs and the planes flying overhead. We’ll go back when there genuinely is peace and not into camps for displaced people. We may not go back to where we came from as the country will require reconstruction.”

Claudia is typical of Oxfam’s partners in Central America. She may be homeless but she is not helpless. Her will to survive, her energy and her hope for a better future are what Oxfam’s development programme is all about.

“It may seem strange to talk about development, here in a refugee situation”, says an Oxfam representative in Central America. “People normally think about refugees as needy people, as victims. But nothing could be further from the truth. These people have hope, strength and courage. What they have managed to do in seven years in these camps is amazing. They are going to be a tremendous resource for El Salvador’s future.”
PREPARING FOR
THE FUTURE

Around 15,000 refugees from El Salvador live in refugee camps just inside the Honduran border. Despite great difficulties, these exile communities are truly remarkable models of hope and dignity. ▶

THE SCALE OF THE
PROBLEM

The migration of one million refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua testifies to the human cost of Central America's wars. They have fled to refuge in neighbouring countries and the United States; one million others remain within their own countries as "displaced people". Altogether some 12 per cent of the people from these three countries are on the move.

But the figures alone do not fully express the tragedy. Refugees fleeing from terror are often traumatized by the memory. One Guatemalan woman in Mexico said: "When we heard that the soldiers were coming, we fled from our homes, because they would come to maltreat us, to frighten us, to destroy our food stocks and to kill our domestic animals, burn our clothes and abduct the women and children. This is why we left the village."

The shock of adjustment to a new and different culture may be great. Even after four and more years in exile the Guatemalan women still look uncomfortable in western clothes with their unfamiliar zips and fasteners.

PROJECT PROFILE

NEW SKILLS FOR SALVADOOREAN
REFUGEES IN HONDURAS

In the sewing workshop of one camp, men, women and children are hard at work at their machines producing shirts, trousers and dresses. The refugees who once depended on second-hand donated clothes now make all they need themselves. Next door in the cobb ing workshop children produce shoes and boots that look very much like the factory-made article and are more hard-wearing. Cobb ing in the morning and going to school in the afternoon, the children supply half the footwear the refugees need. Oxfam funds these and other skill-training workshops.

Helena, the coordinator of the sewing workshop, says: "The majority of us came here illiterate, but we have been given the opportunity to learn basic skills. We've learned so much we can now teach others in the camp. When we go back home skilled people will be needed in all sorts of different areas. That's why we are taking advantage of our time in the camp to learn as much as we can."

In the technical training centre, previously illiterate refugees study maths for eight hours every day and then become maths teachers to pass on what they have learned. In this way, knowledge snowballs. Since 1980, they have transformed the tented camps into villages, with wooden houses, piped water, schools, clinics, chapels, fish ponds, gardens, workshops and animal husbandry projects. Nothing could be more different from the stock image of the refugee as a passive object of charity. These Salvadoreans are determined to retain control of their own lives. They have created new communities based on mutual support and democratic decision-making.

OXFAM PROJECT HON 038
£97,074 over three years

All grant figures are for financial year 1997/88 unless otherwise stated.
They wear these clothes to conceal their identity. They have had to abandon their traditional huipiles, blouses whose intricately woven patterns not only identify them as Indians, but even identify the particular villages they come from. Like the Salvadoreans in Honduras, these women want to return home.

GOING HOME

For some, the desire to go home has become a reality. In El Salvador it started with Tenancingo, a market town that was abandoned after it was bombed in 1983. Under the auspices of the Catholic Church the townspeople began to go back to rebuild their homes in 1986 (see Oxfam in Central America).

But the most dramatic homecoming happened in October 1987: 4,500 refugees from the Mesa Grande camp in Honduras decided that it was time to go home, and crossed the border in a caravan of buses bound for a number of communities in northern El Salvador. Guarjilla is one such community.

People trying to return to homes in the war zones risk coming under suspicion from the army, which has aimed to drain these zones of civilian populations who might aid the guerrillas.

Sadly, the human tragedy of the refugees and displaced has become a political football. All too often, military forces have treated the situation as a strategic problem. Specialists in countering guerrilla warfare preach the necessity to “drain the sea to catch the fish” — the fish being the guerrillas and the sea the civilian population. People are forced to leave their homes to create “free-fire” zones, where anything that moves is shot at.
PROJECT PROFILE

SALVADORAN REFUGEES RETURN FROM HONDURAS

A small boy toils up the slope in the sun, a heavy bundle of wood balanced on his head. Above him, along the hillside a line of houses is being built, men clambering over the wood-frame skeletons, sawing and hammering. Below, in the grass-sided temporary huts, the women are grinding maize into flour for making tortillas — the pancakes which are the staple food of the Salvadorean peasants. In one month, the families here have turned the Guarjilla valley into a thriving community.

“We are happy to be here, because this is where we come from”, says Marta as she deftly pats the maize flour between her hands to make the tortilla. “There is so much work to do. Clearing the land. Putting up the houses. Digging the latrines. We need four hands each.”

But the 920 people who made the astonishing two-day journey back from the Mesa Grande refugee camp to Guarjilla have worked as if they did have four hands. Within the first month they had built temporary housing for everyone, established a clinic with five health promoters, extended the old water supply of the abandoned village of Guarjilla, cleared fields for growing maize and planted a vegetable garden.

They have returned to El Salvador, bringing with them an energy and a community spirit forged in the difficult years of exile. The skills that they learned in Mesa Grande are now serving Guarjilla well. “In Mesa Grande”, says Alberto, a member of the community council, “we learned to be a united community. We had workshops and agriculture. We are the same here. We are organized always as brothers.”

They plan to restart the workshops as well as building a nursery and a school. But they arrived with nothing. At first they needed aid in food, building materials and tools from the Catholic Archdiocese (funded by Oxfam). But Guarjilla is in a war zone. Supplies often do not get through. “We wait and wait but they don’t come”, says Alberto.

Tied between two trees above the road into the settlement is a banner which reads: “We are in search of a lasting peace and justice”. The white flags flying prominently from trees and houses, a signal and a prayer of neutrality to any passing armed forces, are a reminder of how dangerous and how elusive that search is.

OXFAM PROJECT ELS 062
£28,089

TURNABOUT
IN NICARAGUA

In Nicaragua too, as raids by the anti-government contra guerrillas increased in 1981, the government moved people out of the war zones. In some cases people went voluntarily, to areas where they could be better defended. But others, like the Miskito Indians of the Atlantic coast, did not want to leave their land and their homes. Half the population of the coast, long cut off from the rest of Nicaragua, is made up of Indians and of black people from the Caribbean — different in culture, race and language from the rest of the country. They wanted recognition of their different way of life. Thousands fled across the border to Honduras, where Oxfam provided humanitarian aid in refugee camps. Some took up arms against the government.
The identity of a separate culture was at stake.

The ruling Sandinistas had made their most serious mistake: a mistake they came to admit, leading to a complete policy turnabout. One of the main causes of the turnabout was Tasba Pri, where some 10,000 Miskitos were forcibly resettled after 1981. No expense was spared to make Tasba Pri attractive: it was the largest and most expensive single social project undertaken by the government. But the Miskitos continued to resent the resettlement. Though some forms of community organization did develop, Tasba Pri never became the basis for a new Miskito community.

Tasba Pri showed that the problems were more complicated than that of a military emergency. In other parts of the country resettlement for defence reasons continues. But on the Atlantic coast the identity of a separate culture was at stake. In 1985, the Sandinistas admitted their mistake, set about learning about the Atlantic coast and allowed the Miskitos to return to their homes: 90 per cent of Tasba Pri residents chose to go back. Moves began which culminated in granting the coast autonomy within the framework of the Nicaraguan state.

Oxfam, while continuing to provide humanitarian support in areas where resettlements are occurring, has been able to contribute to the rebuilding of homes and communities on the Atlantic coast.

"People just want the end of the war."

"WE ARE TIRED OF SO MUCH TERROR"

Central America's refugees are a testament to tragedy — a prolonged man-made disaster — and of the desperate need for peace. But peace has remained elusive, as diplomacy has repeatedly foundered on lack of political will. There have been several attempts at peace accords, most notably the efforts since 1983 of the Contadora group of eight Latin American countries, and the 1987 regional peace accords promoted by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. Despite these attempts, the conflicts persist and civilians continue to live as they can.
PROJECT PROFILE

A MISKITO COMMUNITY RE-ESTABLISHED: NICARAGUA

Leimus, once a thriving agricultural community, is a bumpy hour's ride from Waspam, the commercial capital of the Coco River region on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. In January 1982 it was evacuated by the government to Tasba Pri. Then, in May 1985 after three and a half years of war, Leimus' 650 inhabitants went back, along with 8,500 other Miskitos.

Inevitably the "slow, orderly and planned return" that the government hoped for did not reckon with people's enthusiasm. In the months that followed, caravans of government and civilian trucks brought thousands of families, their chickens, pigs and zinc roofing back to their river. Communities filled faster than the government could provide adequate supplies. People needed food, seeds and tools to get them through to the next harvest. The government put out appeals for short-term emergency aid. Oxfam helped with grants for two lorries, spare parts, construction materials, and tools and seeds.

Cruelly, contra action impeded this return. The Nicaraguan army had pulled back from the Coco river in a good-faith gesture, but the rebels exploited this in 1986 by blowing up the bridge which forms the main route across the river for the refugees returning from Honduras. Many people again fled the fighting, either to the towns, or back across the border to Honduras. Leimus was one of the few river communities that remained intact. This time the refugees' exile was temporary. Most returned again as soon as the fighting was over. One old woman in Leimus expressed a new feeling about the contras when she said, "Before, we lived well, ate fish. If we wanted to work in the bush we had no fear, only of jaguars. Now we go there afraid. We want to live in peace."

OXFAM PROJECT NIC 099
£88,344

Though in Nicaragua autonomy means the possibility of a fresh start on the Atlantic coast, prospects remain overshadowed by the war. In the words of one coast-dweller: "People just want the end of the war. Autonomy is a political process which rests on an economy in ruins — there is no rice, no beans."

The refugees who returned to their homes in El Salvador returned not because peace had come, but despite its absence. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Salvadorean government advised against returning. The challenge they pose is whether the armed men will respect the right of civilian peasants to till their lands and reap their crops unmolested.

Maria, a member of the Guarjilla community council, explains: "We are tired of so much terror and we don't want to get involved in politics. We want better water, light — but without strings. We are frightened of so many things that have happened in the past. We don't believe in promises. We are civilians and don't want the presence of either armed group."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Refugees</th>
<th>Displaced</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EL SALVADOR</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUATEMALA</td>
<td>115,000</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICARAGUA</td>
<td>322,000</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Asylum</th>
<th>Location of Refugees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BELIZE</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COSTA RICA</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HONDURAS</td>
<td>35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEXICO</td>
<td>130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICARAGUA</td>
<td>16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED STATES</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It seems an obvious thing to say that where there are poor people there are problems of making a living, let alone making improvements in the quality of life. Yet many approaches to development do not make poor people themselves central to solving the problems. One Central American aid worker put it this way:

“What does development mean? For governments and multinational companies, it often means economic growth; high-prestige projects like dams and big modern factories. But this kind of development doesn’t bring any automatic benefits for the poor. In fact, it can make their position worse. Poor farmers in Central America lost their land to export crops like coffee and sugar and bananas. The rich farmers got richer. The peasants got poorer. Then industries came to exploit cheap labour, but the profits went back to the United States and Europe. If development is to mean anything it has to mean something especially for the poor. It has to give the poor more control over their lives; more choice in their future.”

Oxfam is trying throughout Central America to support the kind of development that puts poor people first and gives them more control over their lives. With a history of over 25 years’ work in the region Oxfam has accompanied ordinary Central Americans through profound upheavals of natural disasters, wars and revolutions.

“This is a moment of emergency”, said Alberto, a leader of the Salvadorean refugees who had just returned from a seven-year exile in Honduras. He explained to a visiting Oxfam worker: “We need help at the moment. This year we need many things. In a little time we will be able to do things for ourselves and re-enter normal life.”
The remote highland villages of Guatemala have no newspapers. Radios are the only means of letting people know of births, deaths or other events, and of passing messages from relatives who may be away from home.

Oxfam also supports radio-assisted literacy programmes in Nicaragua. Like the Guatemalan radios, the Nicaraguan programmes also serve a communication function on the remote Atlantic coast, broadcasting in indigenous languages to scattered communities of Miskito and Rama Indians. Joel Zamora of the Atlantic Coast Documentation and Information Centre describes it as “a kind of postal service between people on the Atlantic coast, people in the north and people in Honduras. Because of the problems of communication, people send a card to the radio saying ‘I was ill, now I’m well’.”

Education is a priority for the Nicaraguans. “We believe that in order to create a new nation we have to begin with an education that liberates people”, says Fernando Cardenal, who coordinated the first literacy crusade in 1980. “Only through understanding their past and their present, only through understanding and analysing their reality can people choose their future.”

The literacy crusade worked because it mobilized the enthusiasm of the nation. Factory workers, civil servants, professionals and students, 95,000 in all, volunteered to be trained as teachers. Owners of lorries and buses loaned vehicles to transport the volunteers. They fanned out to the...
slum areas of cities and to the countryside, where they worked alongside the peasants during the day and taught them by night. The whole of Nicaragua became a school. Oxfam grants supported this process (OXFAM PROJECT NIC 022, £82,374, 1980) — a translation to national level of the kind of participation that before had only been possible in single communities. In one year illiteracy was reduced from over 50 per cent to under 12 per cent.

Since 1980 problems have re-emerged, largely due to the war. Elba, a Ministry of Education official in the town of Esteli, explains the problems in her region: “The war and attendant economic and social problems, the destruction of schools, the killing and capture of teachers: these have caused us to go backwards. There has been an increase in illiteracy — to 24.5 per cent now. People are losing their literacy.”

New adult education programmes are now beginning to counteract the new rise in illiteracy. Unlike the crash programme of 1980, the new programmes have been carefully designed for each target population. “We had an evaluation in which people criticized the contents. They said they wanted it more related to their needs in each sector. Some contents were changed, others dropped, to create a new approach coming from the grassroots.”
Since the 1979 uprising which overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, Oxfam's opportunities for supporting community-based projects in Nicaragua have grown dramatically.

Some people say that Nicaragua under its new government, formed by the Sandinista National Liberation Front, has become a left-wing totalitarian state. Others comment on the achievements for the mass of the poor people: eradication of killer diseases; a literacy crusade which taught four out of five illiterate Nicaraguans to read and write; land reform.

Oxfam is a development agency committed to working with the poorest of the poor, and judges Nicaragua from that viewpoint. Many of the people who were our project partners in the 1960s and 1970s in grassroots community development work now hold senior positions in Ministries such as health, education, agriculture and social security. For us, the new Nicaragua provides a unique opportunity to tackle, across the nation, problems rooted in poverty.

Tragically, Nicaragua has not been given the space to reconstruct peacefully. The war against Somoza cost 40,000 lives. No sooner was this over than the country had to face raids from Honduras and Costa Rica from the contras, anti-government rebels commanded in many cases by former National Guards. The country since 1981 has been at war against the contras, who have made special efforts to damage development initiatives, and have assassinated development workers.

The contras have little possibility of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. The real toll of the war, and the associated US economic blockade, is on the development of Nicaragua. After seven years of war the signs are everywhere. One Oxfam visitor in November 1987 recorded the following descriptions in his diary.

Nicaragua diary
Reconstruction has stopped in Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, which Somoza never rebuilt after the 1972 earthquake. It remains a city with suburbs but no centre. Paved roads divide block after block of open grassland into a neat grid. Where banks and office blocks stood 15 years ago there are only the tin shacks of the poor.
"We had nothing except the desire to work."

By the roadsides every morning and every evening queues of people stretching up the street wait patiently for the public transport that gets less and less frequent each month. As vehicles fail they are abandoned. Spare parts are unobtainable. The rusting hulks of cars line the verges, picked clean of tyres, doors, engine parts, seats, glass — anything which can be cannibalized to keep another of the patched-up cars on the road.

Changing dollars at the bank is an experience. With inflation running at about 1,400 per cent the cashier piles stack after stack of notes on the counter in front of you. Many are 20 cordoba notes overprinted as 20,000 cordoba notes. One hundred dollars buys one million two hundred thousand cordobas. One meal in a fancy restaurant now costs about a third of what a Nicaraguan teacher earns in a month.

Eating a more modest meal in the market, we looked up to see three small kids at our shoulders, hovering and looking expectantly at the scraps. One nod from us and they whipped out polythene bags, scooped up the chicken bones, and were off to the next table.

This country is in deep trouble. The most common response when you try to buy something in a shop is "No hay" — "We don’t have any". If you have the money you can buy most things in the unregulated market. But most people can’t afford the prices. And the infrastructure itself is starting to fail: the water supply, the power supply. Factories and hospitals are grinding to a halt for lack of spare parts for machines. Even in the countryside, where the peasants should at least be
able to feed themselves, two years of drought mean that people are going without staples like rice and beans.

Everything that makes this country special, that offered the poor a new hope for their lives, is being slowly strangled by this war. We met Esteban Ramirez who, together with three others, has been trying since 1981 to get a tractor-repair workshop off the ground near Leon. His enthusiasm was tremendous. In 1981, he said, “we were peasants. We didn’t know anything about tractor mechanics. We had nothing. Except the desire to work.”

They still don’t have much. Most of their tools are still in boxes, because they don’t have a garage to work in. They don’t have a garage because shortage of materials has meant that it has been under construction for a year and a half. They hope to have it finished by early 1988. Even then they’ve got problems, because only two of them know anything about mending tractors. Skilled personnel are scarce and training is hard to come by. The British volunteer who came out to train them got pesticide poisoning from the crop-spraying planes and had to go home, leaving behind him training charts in English that none of them can read.

The visit to the Guadalupe Carney ceramics cooperative in Esteli was happier, but the economic problems were eloquently presented: “We manage the finances like a tightrope walker, balancing and teetering. It’s a victory if we don’t fall. We want to be self-sufficient, to produce something the country can use, something that will bring earnings to the country.

HEALTH

In Nicaragua in 1979 under Somoza only one Nicaraguan in four had access to health care. Three years later the figure was almost three people in four. The New England Journal of Medicine commented in 1982: “In just three years, more has been done in most areas of social welfare than in fifty years of dictatorship under the Somoza family”. By 1983 polio was eliminated, malaria was almost eliminated and measles dropped from being the fifth to the thirteenth most common infectious disease. The contra war however has started to take its toll on these achievements, as health posts and health workers have been attacked. Malaria, for example, is on the rise again.

The approach to health in Nicaragua parallels that of the literacy crusade, depending on mobilizing people’s enthusiasm. Health is part of the...
Health volunteers, promoters, are the key to the strategy of involving the population in its own health care. Locally recruited paramedics, they can be trained more quickly than doctors, and can identify more easily with the communities. The work is often dangerous. The contras have made health and education outreach workers a specific target for intimidation, kidnap and assassination. In the early days, the promoters spearheaded the vaccination campaigns. But now the Ministry of Health want to move away from such one-off campaigns and into longer-term public and preventive health campaigns. This means giving the promoters a more all-round training.

This is particularly important in remote areas like the Atlantic coast, where it is difficult for doctors to get in. Oxfam has been supporting the Ministry of Health’s Education Unit in the town of Bluefields, southern Zelaya, since 1985. Here, since 1980, they have trained around 250 rural health promoters who work in 135 communities in the province. Now they are beginning advanced training courses for the promoters to enable them to draw up their own teaching materials, using puppet shows, drawings and other methods.

OXFAM PROJECT NIC 089
£28,644 over two years

But it is not just in Nicaragua that groups are trying to find ways of involving people in their own health care. Many groups throughout Central America are beginning to research the old traditions of herbal medicine in the region, as an adjunct to the more expensive industrial medicine.
"Life is hard", says Claribel, a Guatemalan peasant. "Everything is so expensive. It is difficult to get money to buy the many things that we need." As she speaks she continues to sew tight the edges of the black plastic lining which will keep the air and light out of her wicker basket. The basket will keep medicinal plants fresh during the long months of the dry season. "We are struggling to learn how to prepare these plants", explains Claribel, "so we can substitute some of the medicines we can't afford to buy."

Old people in this area of eastern Guatemala use preparations of lemons as an antiseptic, of oranges as a calmative, and of maize to reduce inflammation. The Guatemalan agency Alianza has been trying to collect information on medicinal plants, test it and give it back to younger generations who have got used to industrial medicines. "This knowledge had almost died out", explains Eugenia, an Alianza health worker who comes to the village schoolroom once a week to train the group of fourteen women and two men.

With funds from Oxfam and other international agencies, Alianza is assisting a variety of groups throughout this region: helping form and develop agricultural cooperatives and crafts marketing groups, as well as promoting health education. People here are living on the edge of subsistence: the heat of the dry season parches the land on which most of the people here depend for a living. Many have to migrate seasonally to the coastal estates to earn extra money at harvest times. Claribel says, "We hope for support". Then she gestures at the schoolroom blackboard covered with details of plant preparation, and adds, "but we have to do our bit by learning."

OXFAM PROJECT GUA 154
£15,527

In 1987 traditional medicine also became a priority for the Health Ministry in Nicaragua. The Ministry had opted initially for modern medicine. But the contra war and a US trade embargo squeezed the economy. The government wanted to cut the US$40m annual drugs bill, and had realized that the national health system would not effectively cover remote and inaccessible areas of the country.

But there is another aim, as outlined by Vera Berstein, coordinator of the Oxfam-funded programme (Oxfam Project NIC 620; £13,911): "One [aim is] to know our roots; to discover what our people know in the way of popular medicine." From almost 19,000 interviews conducted with traditional healers, a short list of 33 plants has been narrowed down for further investigation. The first clinical trials have been done of one plant, camomile, in the treatment of diarrhoea, the most common cause of death in children.
Mother's milk had over 40 times the safety level of DDT.

The small plane passes and repasses over the field. Behind it a haze of pesticide spreads over the cotton bushes. The only sign of danger on the road running past the field is a man with a white flag, himself being sprayed repeatedly. "The smell of pesticides — the smell of my country", wrote a Nicaraguan poet in the 1970s, describing his return after a period abroad. In the cotton belt around León, Nicaraguans have one of the highest rates of pesticide pollution in the world. Mothers' milk in the León area was found to have over 40 times the World Health Organization's safety level of DDT. Under Somoza 3,000 Nicaraguans a year suffered acute pesticide poisoning.

Pesticide use has been halved since 1979. DDT and four other chemicals have been totally banned. Now scientists at León University are trying to develop natural alternatives to pesticides.
Sean Sweezy is a tall rangy American biologist who heads the team of researchers at the University. “León”, he says, “will be the breadbasket of Nicaragua. But we have to find a way of decreasing the cost of protecting the crops.”

Under Somoza out of every three dollars that the big cotton growers around León earned from exporting their crop, one dollar went back to the United States to purchase pesticides. The costs spiralled as resistant strains of pests appeared. Agriculture became a “pesticide junkie”, says Sean, dependent on more and more expensive “fixes” of new chemicals.

The León team have identified a virus which attacks one of the pests that destroy the basic grains. And they have found a wasp that kills several species of pests. Pilot experiments suggest that using these natural agents may reduce the cost of pest control by half. And they are totally harmless to humans. But it is one thing to come up with a solution. It is quite another to convince the farmers to use them.

They are now training technicians from the farming communities to use these natural enemies. If the tests are successful, the small farmers’ union UNAG will promote the new techniques widely among the farmers. “The organic link with the producers is very important”, says Maritsa Vargas, Vice-Dean of the Science Faculty at León.

Land is the crucial issue for development. The poor of Central America cry out for land. The need is so desperate that often they simply take over unused land, braving death at the hands of landowners’ gunmen or the security forces.

A happier outcome was that for a group of Salvadorean refugees who returned from seven years’ exile in a refugee camp in Honduras (see also the booklet “Refugees and displaced people in Central America” for background information). Having fled their country because of a war whose roots lie in the land-hunger of poor peasants, they were able to find abandoned land near their old homes.
Alberto puts his hammer down, climbs down from the rafters of the house he is building, and smiles. Is the designer of the house a refugee too? "He was a refugee", says Alberto proudly. "Now he is a Salvadorean again."

Alberto is a leader of the community of 920 people who returned to Guarjilla in northern El Salvador in October 1987. "This is a moment of emergency", he says. "We need help at the moment. This year we need many things. In a little time we will be able to do things for ourselves and re-enter normal life." The community missed the 1987 planting season for the maize and beans which form the Salvadorean peasant's staple diet. They had to survive on aid until the next harvest in May 1988. Oxfam, through the Catholic Church, is helping them get established. Aid deliveries are often interrupted because of the war that still rages around them. But, lacking tools and short of food, they set to work with a will. Within the first month they had built temporary housing for everyone, cleared fields for growing maize and planted a vegetable garden. The women and children joined in the labour-intensive work of transplanting the young tomato shoots from seed-beds to the soil. Cabbages too were under cultivation.

Maria, another community leader, says, "There have been difficulties, but the people are used to confronting difficulties and overcoming them. When we came this was all abandoned. It was dead. Thanks to God and international support we were able to come here."

OXFAM PROJECT ELS 062
£28,089

In Nicaragua there is a land reform that has distributed some 20 per cent of the country's farmland. One member of the Pedro Altamirano cooperative, near León, told Oxfam:

"In five years we amaze ourselves with what we've achieved. Now we've got land and we can get credit. We've planted maize, sorghum, rice and beans. We have an irrigation scheme and calves we're fattening. Before, things were very bad. The National Guard took our land for the big landowners and the banks wouldn't lend us anything."


It was the peasants themselves who took the lead. They forced the pace and direction of the land reform. After 1979 they did not wait for the government to act. More and more of them took over unused land. A land reform was decreed in 1981. Then in 1984 pressure from the peasants forced the government to extend the benefits of the land reform to individual farmers as well as cooperatives.
Over half of Oxfam’s grants in Nicaragua are destined for the steamy tropical Atlantic coast. This is the poorest and most cut-off part of the country: it comprises half the national territory but is inhabited by less than 10 per cent of the population. Oxfam’s first grant to Miskito Indians on the coast was made in 1964. Here the most serious challenge to the Nicaraguan revolution developed. Here also the new government did its most dramatic about-turn to remedy a serious mistake.

The Sandinistas thought in 1979 that they would be welcomed as heroes on the Atlantic coast. But they were received as strangers by the Miskito, Sumu and Rama Indians and the blacks who had migrated there from the Caribbean. The new government’s ignorance of the coastal people and the latter’s suspicion created an inflammable mixture as the contra war began. Some groups took up arms against the government. The government retaliated by moving whole populations away from the war zone. It was not until the end of 1983 that the government recognized the political problem.

They appointed a high-level commission to study grievances on the coast. In 1985 they publicly admitted they had made a mistake, and announced a new policy. The coast, they said, had a right to its own culture and institutions: it had a right to autonomy within the Nicaraguan state. In the midst of a war they recognized the coastal peoples’ armed struggle as legitimate. An amnesty...
was offered to any fighter who wanted to return.

Ceasefires with several armed groups followed. Refugees began to come home. Many of them joined the local militia to defend their land against contra attacks.

The autonomy process reached a climax in 1987 with the passing of an autonomy law. The government commission had listened to the views of each community, trying to understand what autonomy meant to each ethnic group. Draft proposals were drawn up and intensively discussed. Oxfam contributed to the costs of these grassroots and regional discussions.

With autonomy now on the statute books, the Atlantic coast is preparing for elections for autonomous local governments. In the words of Galio Gurdian of the Atlantic Coast Centre for Information and Documentation:

"Autonomy is nothing but the legal expression of the desire of the community. The law is a law, but we have to struggle to make it work. Now we are at the stage when people, instead of giving us the benefit of the doubt, are demanding concrete results. They want improvement of the disastrous economic conditions and lack of services. Bluefields for example is a beautiful place but the houses are falling apart. There is no clean drinking water: the level of contamination is 100 times above what the World Health Organization recommends. A major problem is that autonomy is a political process which rests on an economy in ruins — there is no rice, no beans."

He estimated that it would take five years to work out how to implement autonomy.
Gradually the situation on the Atlantic coast is returning to normal, and the *contra* threat is being driven back. Oxfam is helping not just with emergency grants for resettlement and return, but also in rebuilding the economy and social fabric.

The Las Minas area is an example. The area is named after the mines that used to be the main source of employment in the area. The foreign companies who controlled the mines did not bother to develop local agriculture — it was easier to import food. After 1979 the mining companies pulled out, leaving a legacy of a scarred environment and a population suffering sickness from the poverty and pollution of years in the mines. Then, after 1981, the area became a main infiltration route for *contra* guerrillas, raiding from bases across the border in Honduras. Crops and livestock were destroyed in these raids. Refugees fled the area. Today, indigenous organizations, farmers'
SUMU COMMUNITIES RE-ESTABLISHED IN NICARAGUA

Murphy Almendarez is a leader of the Sumu people. He explains what their land means to the Sumus: “They could give us the best land anywhere else, but we only defend where we live together with our brothers. We know where home is, we’ve lived there before anyone else. That’s why the Sumus who went to Honduras are returning. It has no price, this correspondence. It’s like a family, like when you know family unity exists.”

The Sumu communities are very different from the better-known Miskitos. Once the largest indigenous group, their villages were sacked by the Miskitos in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their numbers declined as they were sold into slavery. For the Miskitos, autonomy often conjures up a hazy notion of recapturing the past power of the Miskito kingdom, established under British patronage in the eighteenth century. Ronas Dolores Green, a Sumu elder, described his vision of “living with only our people, breathing pure air and bathing in our clear fresh rivers [as it was] before the foreigners came and little by little exterminated our resources, converting our land to a desert.”

The desire of the Sumus to reunite their tightly-knit communities around Las Minas was strong. The Sumu organization Sukawala asked the regional government for assistance. Oxfam grants helped to pay for a comprehensive programme for the return of 308 Sumu families (2,156 people), with the aim of rapidly restoring self-sufficiency. Food supplies were provided for four months, while tools and seeds allowed the communities to resow their land and repair the damage to long-abandoned homes.

OXFAM PROJECT NIC 112
£45,169 (1986)
Then the economic ravages of war and neglect had to be corrected. Oxfam is supporting cooperative credit and marketing schemes to restart the economy.

**PROJECT PROFILE**

**LIVESTOCK LOANS AND COOPERATIVE SHOPS IN NICARAGUA**

Working through the Agrarian Reform Ministry (MIDINRA), Oxfam is supporting a revolving loan fund for chicken, cattle and pig rearing that will improve diet and health, as well as income. The scheme, like so much else in Nicaragua, aims to build the participation of local people. It works this way: a family receives two pigs. In return they undertake to give to the scheme, from the pigs they breed, three piglets in three years. The scheme works in the same sort of way with the cattle and chickens. At present 2,400 families are involved. Later, it is hoped that another 2,100 families will be able to join the scheme.

The revolving fund will lift production levels. But a restored economy needs marketing mechanisms as well. This is the aim of a second project, run by the small farmers’ organization UNAG. A chain of farmers’ shops has been established in a pilot project which will later spread to the whole country. The shops, democratically managed by an elected committee of the local farmers, stock basic consumer goods and agricultural supplies, purchasing as much as they can locally. Around 7,000 families are expected to benefit in the Las Minas area. Oxfam is helping to fund the administrative costs of the shops and the purchase of their initial stock.

**OXFAM PROJECTS NIC 114 £90,000**

**NIC 115 £125,035**
PROJECT PROFILE

BILINGUAL LITERACY PROGRAMMES IN BELIZE

No one knows how many Salvadoreans there are in Belize. As many as 10,000 refugees may have fled here. Though they have generally been made welcome in Belize, the Spanish-speaking Salvadoreans face a double shock — the difficulties of dealing with the English language, as well as the trauma of uprooting from their homes.

Education can help. The people who want to settle have to begin learning English. And the people who want to return have to find ways of continuing to keep their culture alive in exile.

World University Service, with funding from Oxfam, and the education ministry of Belize are collaborating to produce bilingual adult literacy materials. Literacy is one of the keenest demands of the refugees, opening the door to a better life. But the English literacy course will help also Spanish-speaking Belizeans integrate with their English-speaking neighbours.

OXFAM PROJECT BEL 002
£5,000

In Belize, Oxfam is supporting a pioneering collaboration between a voluntary agency and a government ministry to provide bilingual educational materials. Originally designed for Salvadorean refugees, the programme will also help integration of Spanish-speaking Belizeans into the newly independent nation.

THE ETHNIC DIMENSION THROUGHOUT CENTRAL AMERICA

A general lesson emerges from the often bitter experience on Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast. Nicaragua has grappled with the difficult balance between ethnic autonomy and national unity. The lessons learned there will have a major impact not just on their own future, but also elsewhere in Central America.

Nicaragua is not the only multi-ethnic society in Central America. Its
experience of ethnic conflict may provide a model for the rest of the region. Some 60 per cent of Guatemala’s population are indigenous peoples — pure descendants of the Mayans whose pre-Hispanic civilization was centred in Guatemala. The whole Atlantic coastline of Central America has an ethnic composition similar to

Nicaragua: Honduras has a large Miskito population; Costa Rica has both indigenous peoples and blacks of Caribbean origin; and tiny Belize has a majority black population with a small population of indigenous groups and a substantial minority of ladinos swollen by refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala.

CONCLUSION

The Central American experience points to an important general lesson: for development to work, it must rest on poor people being in control of their own lives. This is not simply an abstract moral point: it has very real consequences. Nicaragua’s literacy crusade worked because it mobilized the enthusiasm of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people. The returning Salvadorean refugees were able to achieve so much in agriculture, housing and health because their enthusiasm was mobilized. Harnessing this resource is what equitable development is all about.
Independence from Britain 1981. A British garrison remains for defence - Guatemala still claims Belize as its own territory. Talks with Guatemala on this issue are currently deadlocked. This sparsely populated country has more of a Caribbean than a Central American identity. However, the presence of Salvadorean and Guatemalan refugees and growing US involvement mean that Belize cannot remain totally aloof from the region's turmoil. The 1985 election, won by Manuel Esquivel's conservative United Democratic Party, brought the country closer to US policy than the previous People's United Party government of George Price. Elections in 1989 returned Price to power.

**BELIZE (FORMERLY BRITISH HONDURAS)**
COSTA RICA

Altitude and lack of natural resources discouraged the large-scale plantations and foreign companies characteristic of the rest of Central America. Instead colonists set up medium-sized farms, creating the extensive middle class that has given Costa Rica its distinct and mostly peaceful history. Independence from Spain 1821. Concentration of land in a few hands began in the 1880s with the introduction of coffee as export crop, and US fruit companies established banana plantations in the Atlantic coast region. But the smallholding sector remained intact.

A disputed election triggered a brief civil war in 1948, after which the 1949 constitution abolished the army. Since then power has alternated in western-style democracy between the social democratic National Liberation Party (PLN) and conservative Popular Social Christian Union (PUSC). Stability and an extensive welfare system were threatened by the economic crisis of the 1980s and military tension grew with Nicaragua due to the presence of contra rebels in Costa Rica. Growing alignment with US foreign policy in the region since 1980 was partially offset by the election victory of Oscar Arias' PLN in 1986, vowing to defend traditional neutrality. Arias in 1987 was a prime mover of a regional peace plan, the Esquipulas-2 accords, which called for an end to US funding for the contras and for processes of dialogue and national reconciliation in all the Central American countries affected by conflict. Stalled throughout much of 1988, the peace process, at least in Nicaragua, gathered steam again in 1989. Ironically, however, the creation of a Central American Parliament, envisaged in the 1987 accords, was set back by the Costa Rican parliament's refusal to endorse it.

EL SALVADOR

Independence from Spain 1821. The introduction of coffee in the late nineteenth century as an export crop created the elite "fourteen families" and dispossessed peasant farmers of their land. The army seized power and crushed a peasant uprising in 1932, massacring up to 30,000 in reprisal.

Post-second-world-war modernization led the army to institutionalize its rule through managed elections. Christian Democratic and socialist opposition parties were formed in the 1960s. The introduction of cotton and sugar as export crops tightened the land squeeze. The Central American Common Market in the 1960s promoted Salvadorean industrialization, but weakened the Honduran economy, resulting in the "100 hour" war between the two countries in 1969 and effectively ending the Common Market.
Election frauds in 1972 and 1977 deprived the united parliamentary opposition of power. Extra-parliamentary opposition and guerrilla movements began to grow, prompting a growth of right-wing death squads in retaliation. The "Young Officers' Coup" in 1979 created a military/civilian junta which promised reform. Political killings escalated and many politicians left the junta in 1980 to form a united opposition, the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR). The FDR allied with the united guerrilla movement - the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN). The civil war began, prompting increasing US military aid to the government. Elections held in 1982, 1984 and 1985, without the participation of the FDR, created the centre-right government of José Napoleón Duarte's Christian Democrats.

Worsening economic crisis and continuing war eroded support for the Duarte government, which lost power to Alfredo Cristiani's right-wing ARENA party in 1988 and 1989 elections. Initial hopes of a negotiated peace were dashed in 1989 as the FMLN withdrew from talks in protest at human rights violations. In November 1989 during the FMLN's largest offensive of the war, a clamp-down on humanitarian workers and the death-squad-type killings of six Jesuit priests prompted the US Congress to consider a cut-off of military aid.

GUATEMALA

Independence from Spain 1821. A local coffee elite arose in the late nineteenth century, though financing, processing and marketing of coffee were controlled by foreign (German and then US) interests. The United Fruit Company of the US, producing bananas, became the largest landowner and exporter by the 1930s. A popular coalition for reform ousted the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico in 1944. A US-sponsored coup in 1954 overthrew the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz which threatened nationalization of fruit company land. A succession of elected right wing governments and military coups followed.

A counter-insurgency campaign, with US aid, against the guerrilla movement in the 1960s bolstered the army, which became the most sophisticated in Central America, and in the 1970s acquired its own economic holdings in land and finance. The Central American Common Market benefitted Guatemala in the 1960s to a greater extent than its trading partners, making it the most developed country in the region. A resurgence of guerrilla movements in the late 1970s, characterized by the involvement of the Indian population, led to the military taking draconian emergency powers in the countryside. Human rights violations led to a cut-off of US aid under President Carter. A new counter-insurgency strategy, combining
military tactics with economic aid, was introduced after a 1982 coup by General Rios Montt. General Mejia Victores toppled Rios Montt in a 1983 coup. Displaced people were housed in army-controlled "model villages" and special regions designated as "development poles".

A 1985 election, boycotted by the left, resulted in victory for the centrist Christian Democratic government of Vinicio Cerezo, promising reform. US aid was resumed. Cerezo continued the military regime's policy of neutrality in the contra war in Nicaragua. The Cerezo government survived two military coup attempts in 1988 and 1989.

HONDURAS

Independence from Spain 1821. No strong local power elite was established. A railway building programme in the nineteenth century created a large debt to Europe, leading the US at the turn of the century to take over the country's economic management. Lack of state support led to the country missing the coffee boom, but the Standard Fruit and United Fruit companies of the US bought up large tracts of the Atlantic coast for banana plantations, becoming the major power in the land. Rivalry between the fruit companies was mirrored in a 1924 civil war between liberals and conservatives. The fruit companies merged in 1932, providing stability under the 17-year dictatorship of Tiburcio Carías Andino.

Post-second-world-war liberalization permitted the conditions for the successful 1954 banana workers' strike, which opened the way for other organizations of workers and peasants demanding better wages and land reform. Land reform decrees were passed 1962 and 1975, but neither was vigorously implemented. With growing pressure on land, Salvadorean settlers were expelled in 1969. This was the immediate cause of the "100 hour war" between the two countries (the long-term cause was the worsening Honduran trade balance with El Salvador under the Central American Common Market). The peasant movement began land takeovers in the 1970s. After virtually uninterrupted military rule since 1963, a civilian government formed by the Liberals won two terms in 1982 and 1984 elections. The National Party's Rafael Leonardo Callejas won the 1989 elections, encouraging hopes that the contra bases in the west of the country may be dismantled. The army retained considerable power due to growing involvement in the region's conflicts (with the contra bases, escalating US military manoeuvres and cooperation with the Salvadorean army to seal the border to FMLN Salvadorean guerrillas).
NICARAGUA

Independence from Spain 1821. No strong local power elite was initially established. Foreign involvement was strong, with a British presence on the Atlantic coast and a growing US presence from the second half of the nineteenth century. US forces occupied the country from 1912-1925 and 1927-1933, opposed by the guerrilla force of Augusto Cesar Sandino. The marines left the country after creating a National Guard under the leadership of Anastasio Somoza, who had Sandino killed in 1934. Somoza seized power in 1936, beginning a 43-year family dynasty which, together with a group of close associates, gained control of 20 per cent of the cultivable land and most of the businesses.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), founded in 1961, began a guerrilla war. The corruption and brutality of Somoza rule united a broad front of most of the nation behind the FSLN, who toppled the regime in 1979 at a cost of 40,000 lives and damage to 25 % of the factories. The FSLN inherited a plundered Treasury of US$3.5m and a national debt of $1.6bn. The new government decreed a land reform and began mass campaigns for health and literacy.

Ex-National Guards regrouped in exile in 1981 to form the leadership of the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces (FDN) - the main contra (counter-revolutionary) group. US funding for the contras began covertly. Discontent, particularly among Atlantic coast peoples, swelled anti-government forces. The US imposed a trade embargo on Nicaragua in 1985. The FSLN won the presidency and a parliamentary majority in 1984 elections, contested by seven parties across the political spectrum but boycotted by some parties of the right. A 1985 amnesty offer and discussion of autonomy (incorporated in the 1987 constitution) for the Atlantic coast began to normalize the security situation. From 1988 onwards, the contra offensive began to weaken. The economy, however, continued to worsen under the impact of war, embargo and the impact of the 1988 Hurricane Joan, adding up to an estimated US$5 billion in losses by 1989. Hyperinflation running at over 20,000 per cent annually forced the government to cut budgets and services. This hit the poor hardest and put social reforms into reverse, but it did begin to bring inflation back under control in 1989.

The Esquipulas-2 negotiations between the Central American Presidents brought the promise of peace. Nicaragua was at first isolated within Esquipulas-2, as the other Central American Presidents shifted the focus from regional conflict to the question of "democratization" in Nicaragua. But Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega made substantial concessions in the run-up to February 1990 elections. As a result, the Central American presidents agreed in 1989 to the disbanding of the contras. However, though the US government suspended military aid to the contras, "non-lethal" aid was continued. The December 1989 deadline passed without the contras being dismantled, and fighting intensified.
CENTRAL AMERICA


NICARAGUA


EL SALVADOR


GUATEMALA


HONDURAS


PHOTO CREDITS

Claire Ball / Oxfam
42 left

Piers Cavendish
34 right

Ben Fawcett / Oxfam
4

Joe Fish
7

Chris Garnet / WUS
48 left

Mike Goldwater / Network
2 right, 5 left, 6, 9 bottom, 10 right, 11,
13 left, 15 right, 16 bottom, 21,
26 top, 32, 33, 36 top, 40 top, 44 right,
46 / 47.

Ana Cecilia Gonzalez
1, 2 left, 5 right, 9 top, 10 left, 12,
13 right, 14, 15 left, 16 top, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23,
24 bottom, 26 bottom, 29, 35,
37 right, 38, 39, 41 left, 42 right,
43, 44 left, 45, 46, 47, 48 right, 49 centre,
back cover.

Neil MacDonald / Oxfam
27 left, 37 left, 40 bottom.

Oxfam
3

Steve Smith / Andes
8 left