

## NEWS from Nicaragua

Helen Shears, Development Worker ICD/CIIR reports

ACMCC (**Association Colectivo De Mujeres Constructoras DE Condega (Collective of Women Builders)**) is a local NGO in Northern Nicaragua which has been going since 1987. As builders it was hard to get steady work so they decided to build their own workshop to be able to have their own space and diversify in other skills. Between 1993 and 1996 they had training in electrics, carpentry, welding, machine maintenance and teacher training from volunteers from Germany and Britain and from the national technical college. Since 1995 they have sold wooden furniture and established a training school for women who are interested in non-traditional trades. There is a dormitory and amenities for women to stay. Trainees can stay on as apprentices providing there is enough work. Integrated into the training is a strong feminist ideology to help support the women and this work is spread to the work with other organisations in the municipality to raise consciousness about generic roles. In the future ACMCC aims to offer courses to women internationally and to give more support to women who want to set up on their own.

Since Hurricane Mitch in 1998 work has been in three areas:

1. **Carpentry and furniture production.** Six women work in this area producing one off custom built items and working on larger contracts including work for post Mitch rebuilding/housing projects round the country funded by international NGOs and church organisations.

2. **Building houses for women.** In Nicaragua there is a 500,000 housing deficit. A natural disaster, apart from the



immediate tragedy brings other social issues to light such as an acute housing problem and severe overcrowding so planning has had to be completely reworked. In Doncega over 500 houses were lost, affecting about 800 families. In the town

the local council bought 300 plots for building houses. Local organisations raised money for new housing projects. ACMCC got together with Red de Mujeres de Condega (Condega Women's Network) to build houses for women heads of households who will then become the legal owners of the

homes (traditionally land is owned by men). Women pay for their houses over a ten year period, a sliding scale system that is sensitive to a changing economic personal situation due to the very unstable local and national economy. Many NGO housing projects throughout the country work in this way, also including unskilled and skilled labour on houses as a way of payment. So far ACMCC have built 32 houses doing all the carpentry, plumbing and electrics and have started building 6 with help from women's brigades organised through groups in New York and Sheffield. Over the last year 6 more houses have been built by a group of 6 local women, this has been funded by TROCAIRE (Ireland).



3. **Carpentry training and support.** This has been developed to involve new women in the trades and specifically to maintain a pool of apprentices for larger contracts. ACMCC also responds to requests from other groups trying to set up or already working in similar work to offer training or exchange ideas and experiences. It is virtually impossible for women to set up business by themselves in the present economy so this kind of outreach work is breaking new ground. Contact has been made with other organisations at local, national and regional level and a trip made to El Salvador to exchange experience of housing in reconstruction projects.

The situation in Nicaragua is extremely hard at the moment under a neo-liberal government, the country is in debt, there is extreme poverty and 70% under-employment resulting in 20% emigration to neighbouring countries (mainly Costa Rica) and the USA. Most recently world coffee prices are hitting hard, undercutting production costs and there has been a timber plague affecting the pine plantations and there is a drought at the moment where 75% of the basic grain crops have been lost.

It is obviously hard for such projects as ACMCC to survive but when they do it only strengthens them, and they hope to continue to work constructively giving a glimmer of hope to the people they work with. Many thanks to all those who have supported this and similar projects - it is much appreciated. For more information contact the project: [mcc@ibw.com.ni](mailto:mcc@ibw.com.ni)