



NICARAGUA UPDATE FEBRUARY 2020

On 10 January, the FSLN government celebrated 13 years in power. Tens of thousands of Nicaraguans took to the streets to celebrate the achievements of the government and the transformation of society which has taken place since Daniel Ortega was elected in 2007 after seventeen years of neo-liberal government. Many say that the FSLN government has rewritten the nation's history, eliminating poverty and the legacy of dictator Somoza.

Since 2007, the FSLN government has created programmes focussed in particular on strengthening the economy and the productive capacity of families as the nucleus of a new society. Social, human and economic development have formed a central part of the government's programme, with emphasis on policies which benefit the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Free health and free education are now guaranteed; at the same time, 420,000 land titles have been given to families since 2007 (with a further 28,000 planned in 2020), giving them legal rights to their own land. Poverty has been reduced by half and 1.2m children have been lifted out of food poverty. In addition, 54% of the 2020 national budget has been ring-fenced for social expenditure.

Government programmes have been rolled out in the barrios and communities in order to improve conditions for families. Electricity coverage in the country is now 97.16% (as opposed to 55% in 2006). Apart from fulfilling a basic need, this has led to a more stable income for many families involved in farming, since production had previously been hampered by constant power cuts and lack of power. Sewerage and access to drinking water (now 85%) has also been vastly improved since 2007.

Nicaragua is also taking tangible actions to fight climate change by providing green energy. 80% of the energy matrix is now provided from renewable sources, as opposed to 25% in 2007. The government's target is 90% by 2020. The government is also prioritising protected areas. In 2020, US\$2 million will be invested in protected areas of the country, with an emphasis on sustainable tourism and commerce in Nicaragua's natural reserves. Municipal staff members will also be trained in the care of wildlife reserves and ecological parks.

Decent low-cost housing is another feature of the government's programme. Since 2007, 130,000 new houses have been built. 10,000 were built in 2019 and the government plans another 50,000 over the next five years as part of the Bismarck Martinez housing initiative.

In education, 2.3 million students now have access to free education. In addition, 1.2 million students receive free school meals, something that had not existed prior to 2007. All students receive free backpacks and text books. Technical education is also free – in 2006, there were 17,412 students in free technical education – this figure had increased to 37,620 by 2019. The number of technical schools has increased from 26 in 2006 to 153 now. And 6% of the national budget goes to public universities. In 2019, 250 digital classrooms were built in secondary schools, a 250% increase on the previous year. And all 57,000 teachers in Nicaragua will be undergoing training in new technologies during 2020. The Nicaraguan government believes that providing free and quality education for all Nicaraguans is a human right, an instrument of social justice to eradicate poverty and to provide a bright future for all Nicaraguans.

Considerable advances have been made regarding the position of women. Constitutional reforms of May 2014 established a minimum quota of 50 per cent women candidates for party political and public office and women's participation in the social and economic life of the country has risen. Social programmes such as the provision of low interest loans and training for urban women have empowered women by giving them greater control of resources and increased economic autonomy. Nicaragua now occupies position 5 in the World Economic Forum gender gap report (as opposed to position 62 in 2006) and the UN and inter-parliamentary union have ranked Nicaragua third in the world for gender balance in politics, with women making up 42% of the National Assembly.

“Since Daniel Ortega came to power, he and his team have rolled out a series of tasks leading to better participation of women and on an equal footing with men in important areas... more women now occupy important posts where decisions are made...” – Tirsia Saenz, journalist and political analyst

The Government has also announced the relaunch of Women's Police Stations as part of a campaign in which it will be seen as the duty of all state institutions to combat violence against women and to protect women's lives. The campaign will focus on peace, security and dignified lives for all women and ensure that violence against women is reported and punished accordingly.

The achievements of the government relating to the care and living conditions of children in Nicaragua have been recognised by the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF. In addition to reducing infant mortality and neonatal mortality rates, maternal mortality has dropped from 97 to 37.5 for every 100,000 live births from 2007 to 2016, largely due to the increase in the number of births attended in health centres and the attention by qualified personnel in addition to the increase in the number of maternity centres, which now number 178. Chronic malnutrition associated with poverty, inequality and inadequate food has also been reduced from 17.3 percent in 2006 to 12.8 percent in 2007. The number of child

development centres, catering for children under the age of 6, has also increased, from 63 in 2007 to 270 at the end of 2018.

The government is committed to guaranteeing the right to free health care through expanding and improving the coverage and quality of its services. Spending on health care has tripled since 2007. 18 new hospitals have been built, and there are plans for 15 more, marking the beginning of a network of modern hospitals in the country. Incidences of breast and cervical cancer have been reduced due to the introduction of ultrasound screening in many hospitals and improved treatment. Nicaragua is also starting to produce its own medicines.

In 2010, the government established the *Todos con Voz* programme, designed to give special attention to people with disabilities. The programme does not only attend to health issues, but also provides resources such as wheelchairs and walking frames to those who need it, as well as guaranteed tests such as MRI and CT scans.

From 2010-2017, the economy grew by an average of 5.1%. Families also benefitted from production grants and low-cost loans enabling women to set up micro businesses.

“The work that the government did with families like ours has been excellent because it relates to development as a whole - we were not only trained in how to manage pigs, we were taught processing and business skills which is very important. This has improved our quality of life” – Carmen Zelaya (source: TN8 tv)

The government has also announced a ‘*One Nation, One Product*’ project which will be providing support to 50,000 small creative businesses nationwide for the development and implementation of business plans, as well as funding to participate in national and international business fairs and access to digital marketing platforms. This initiative is part of the Creative Economy Model that the Nicaraguan government is implementing throughout the country.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has praised Nicaragua’s social programmes that address food security and malnutrition, particularly in rural areas. Nicaragua now produces 90% of the food it consumes and is one of only 38 countries to reach the UN Millennium Development Goal of cutting malnutrition by half. The Zero Hunger programme has supported over 100,000 women by providing them with pregnant cows and sows, sheep, goats and hens, as well as materials to house these animals and free technical support and training. The Healthy Backyard programme provides training and seeds to urban families to improve nutrition and generate a family income.

Since 2007, Nicaragua’s trade unions have seen their rights restored and they now play a central role in decision-making and are valued for their contribution to society. The neo-liberal governments from 1997-2007 saw massive redundancies in the public sector and, as a consequence, the trade unions were considerably weakened. Today, the trade unions enjoy solid collective bargaining agreements and year on year salary increases. Particularly notable is the strength of the public sector unions, and the 60,000 strong Self-Employed

Workers' Confederation CTCP, representing street sellers and all those who eke a living outside formal employment structures.

The FLSN government has devoted more resources to the Caribbean region than any other previous government, providing new roads, drinking water and sanitation, energy coverage, health and hospitals and schools, thereby improving the quality of life for people living in the region and providing them with new opportunities for development. An important initiative saw the opening of a road between Managua and Bluefields in May last year. In addition, the region saw the installation in Corn Island of the first and only solar plant in Latin America.

Unsurprisingly, there is a broad consensus among the Nicaraguan people in favour of the government's model of national development, this in spite of constant attempts by the United States and the right wing opposition in Nicaragua to return Nicaragua to colonial status, efforts which included the defeated coup attempt in 2018. As in the 1980s, it is clear that Nicaragua again represents 'the threat of a good example'. The latest poll by independent M&R Consultants covering the last quarter of 2019 shows that the Sandinista government is more popular than ever and all but a tiny majority of Nicaraguans reject the violent tactics and street blockades used by the US-supported opposition in 2018. The poll found that 52% say they strongly support the FSLN and 60% say they are likely to vote for the party in the 2021 national election. 65% of those polled support the current government, 55% think that President Ortega is leading the country in the right direction and 59.7% hold a favourable opinion of his administration. Likewise, 59% think that the Sandinista government is a factor of unity for Nicaraguans and 58.3% say that it is a government that generates hope. A strong majority believe that the country has made progress compared to six years ago. 61.1% think that the current government is the best the country has ever had and 69.3% that the Ortega government works for the general population. A significant finding of the M & R poll was the nearly universal rejection of the violent tactics of the US-funded opposition. In addition, 82.5% of those polled agreed that 'it is the people through their vote who should decide who should govern and when'. Only 16.5% were in favour of the government being replaced, while over two-thirds rejected pressure on the country by the international community to have early elections. 69.9% rejected attempts to remove President Ortega.

All of the Nicaraguan government's programmes going forward will focus on working for peace and prosperity through the integrated development model which has been implemented since 2007. Family, community and society are the fundamental blocks of this model. The defence of the country's sovereignty remains paramount as it seeks to build a better future for its people. Tens of thousands of Nicaraguans are marching every Saturday for peace, prosperity and non-violence. In their own words: ***'The sun lights us up, it never sets'***.

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