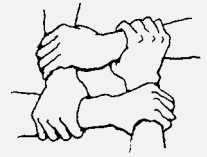




Newsletter from the Sierra Madre #56

April, 2006



PROJIMO Community Based Rehabilitation Program

run by and for disabled villagers in western Mexico (Coyotitan)

HEALTHWRIGHTS

Workgroup for People's Health and Rights

PROJIMO Skills Training and Work Program

run by disabled youth in rural Mexico (Duranguito)

In this newsletter we look at a Community Based Rehabilitation initiative in Honduras. We explore the underlying causes of disability, worsening poverty, environmental demise, and social upheaval that can be traced to the war of the "Contras" in Nicaragua in the 1980s. We also look at the plight of impoverished Hondurans who left their country in search of jobs in the south-eastern USA, only to be caught in the nightmare of Hurricane Katrina.

Honduras -- New Damage from Old Wounds: US-backed "Contra" War on Nicaragua in the '80s still takes heavy toll

When Hurricane Katrina struck the coastal towns of Louisiana and Mississippi in September 2005, among those who suffered great hardships were the uncounted thousands of destitute, undocumented immigrants from Latin America, most notably from Honduras.

Honduras, in spite of its fertile lands and abundant natural resources, today remains one of the poorest countries in the Americas. On the "Human Development Index" including child mortality and life expectancy, Honduras is second from the bottom, after Haiti.

Few people realize the magnitude or longevity of the damage to Honduras caused by the US-supported "Counter-Revolution" against the Sandinistas of Nicaragua in the 1980s. In terms of its "human development," the UNDP estimates that socioeconomic and environmental damage caused by the Contra War set Honduras back 15 to 20 years.

The violence, disability and environmental demise set in motion by the Contra War continues to this day. Even now, 20 years later, innocent people and farm animals still have legs blown off by land mines. Destructive floods, made worse by the Contras' strategic deforestation, are driving more and more poor farmers from their homes. The mass exodus of land-

less, jobless peasants to the dreamed of "land of plenty" in the North is still in motion.

To the thousands of Hondurans who fled the dangers, floods and social upheaval in their homeland, settling in shanty towns of Louisiana and Mississippi, their run-in with Hurricane Katrina and the government's callous response must have seemed like going from the frying pan into the fire.

On these pages, David Werner reports first-hand on the some of the new damage in Honduras caused by landmines and deforestation stemming from the Contra War, and on community-based efforts to cope. Next, Bruce Hobson relates how

Honduran migrant workers in the US were especially hard hit by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Both disasters—the Contra War and the US government's inhumane response to Katrina—are rooted in the same short-sighted market forces, disregard for human rights, and abuses of power.

Landmines, floods, and banditry: Ongoing damage in Honduras from the Contra War on Nicaragua in the 1980s

Honduran farming communities living in the towns and villages near the Nicaragua border are still suffering new damages from the US-backed war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua during the 1980s.



Although the countryside in Honduras along the Nicaragua border looks peaceful, landmines left over from the Contra War still spread fear and restrict the movements of the local people. New injuries still occur and many people have abandoned their farms and moved to city slums—or entered illegally into the USA.

In October 2005 I (David Werner) became acutely aware of these problems. I was visiting Honduras as a consultant to a Community Based Rehabilitation program coordinated by the Instituto Juana Leclerc. Among the areas I visited was the mountainous region bordering Nicaragua. Here a significant cause of disability, even today, is landmines. Villagers—as well as their cows, horses, mules, pigs, and other livestock—are still being maimed or killed by landmines planted by the Contras over 16 years ago. Because some of the mine victims are leaders in the local CBR initiative, I had an opportunity to talk with them.

A meeting with landmine victims

Traveling to the *Departamento de Paraíso*, on the Nicaragua border, I was able to examine the injuries and listen to the stories of persons who are coping with injuries from landmines and other disasters resulting from the Contra War. What is most disturbing is that some of the injuries and damage stemming from that war during the 1980s occurred a decade or more after the war ended! New injuries—both personal and collective—continue to take place up to the present, with no end in sight.

One amputee from a landmine, Santos Barrientos, told me his story. Santos lives in the border town of Trojes, and is president of the local CBR Committee in the district.

Santos explained that during the Nicaragua War the Contras used Trojes as one of their main bases to invade Nicaragua. He was a schoolboy at the time.



Santos Barrientos lost his leg to a landmine 8 years after the end of the Contra war.

Many of Santos' neighbors and friends were injured or killed by artillery fire from the mountains, or from stepping on mines. When the war officially ended in July 1988, Santos was thankful that he and his family had been spared.

Eight years went by. Santos had married and had children. He worked on a coffee farm. Then, one morning in 1997 when he was working on the hillside farm, suddenly the ground under him exploded. Both his legs and his right hand were shattered. His right leg had to be amputated.

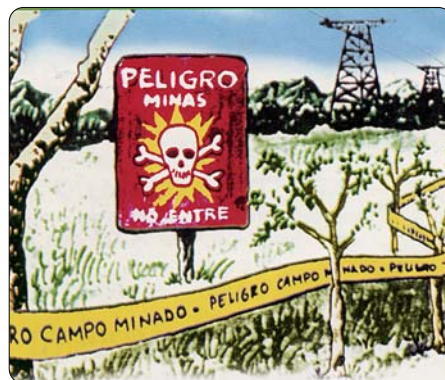
Santos' landmine injury did not occur in the high-mountain area still posted as dangerous for landmines, but at a much lower elevation. A decade before, high in the mountains along the Honduras-Nicaragua border, the Contras had planted mines by the thousands to deter the Sandinistas from attacking their bases on the Honduran side.

Over the years, however, heavy rains and mudslides have washed mines from the forested highlands down into the coffee plantations on the lower slopes. It was Santos' bad luck to step on one.

Even today, villagers are still terrified of stepping on landmines. Mine-cleaning projects coordinated by the United Nations and Red Cross have to date defused over 80,000 landmines, 30,000 of them in the Dept. of Paraíso. But huge numbers of these cruel explosives still remain, and the "no-man's lands" along the border are still blocked off.

Ironically, with the passing years, the danger zone has enlarged. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch, with its torrential mudslides, carried landmines much farther down the mountainsides into corn fields and the pasture land of the plains. As recently as April 2005, a

farmer's tractor picked up a landmine in its tread. Luckily it didn't explode. But the shaken farmer abandoned both his tractor and farm. His family joined the thousands of refugees who have moved to the growing slums of the cities.



Even today, a "No Man's Land" along the Honduras-Nicaragua border is roped off posted with signs saying: DANGER! MINES! DO NOT ENTER!



From a flyer warning children: MINES KILL. DON'T TOUCH!

A perpetual disaster area. Following the end of the Contra War, the UN classified the southern border of Honduras a disaster area, and has sponsored several refugee and development projects, some of which continue to this day. Landmines still remain an ever-present danger. For years after the war, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), in an attempt to reduce the ongoing harm and win the hearts

and minds of the people, initiated an array of community "self-help" projects. We saw the vestiges of these as we drove along the roads between border towns, where fading signs announced a USAID water project or other undertaking, now defunct.



Despite such efforts, the damage resulting from the war continues to escalate. Landmines are just the tip of the iceberg.

A growing ecological disaster has precipitated from the massive deforestation caused by the Contras on the mountain slopes along the Nicaragua border.

The rationale for destroying the forests was essentially the same as that used by the US troops in the war against Vietnam. In Vietnam, toxic (cancer and birth-defect causing) defoliants were used to denude the forests and expose the hiding places of the Viet Cong. In the "low-intensity" war on Nicaragua, instead of defoliants, the US-sponsored Contras razed the mountain forests with an army of chainsaws. After the trees were felled, they were set aflame. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of remote mountain forest went up in smoke. Consumed in the inferno were some of the ecologically most precious cloud forests, together with their endangered wildlife: monkeys, ocelot, deer, etc.

From deforestation: erosion and floods. With this systematic destruction of the mountain forests, top soil began to erode. Widespread deforestation is one of the reasons why Honduras was so severely devastated by Hurricane Mitch.



Deforestation on the hills in the background of this photo leads to the erosion as seen in the foreground.

In the long run, *hidden landmines have taken far fewer lives -- and caused less displacement of families -- than has the wanton destruction of the trees.* But there are other pernicious results as well.

Contras turned bandits. Yet another long-term aftermath of the Contra War has been a pandemic of lawlessness and crime, which has swept the border region and to some extent continues to this day.

During the height of the war, over 40,000 Nicaraguan Contras were stationed on the Honduran side of the border. Although US President Ronald Reagan called them "Freedom Fighters," they were essentially mercenary "soldiers of fortune," trained by the US military in terrorist tactics. From Honduras they made barbaric attacks on towns and villages in Nicaragua, plundering villages, raping women, and massacring even children. In Honduras, too, they behaved like thugs. They routinely stole pigs, chickens, vehicles, and anything else they fancied. They marched into homes and helped themselves to anything they wanted—including young girls. The local Hondurans had little recourse. They either suffered in silence, fled in despair, or protested and suffered the consequences.

During the war the Contras—being salaried by US taxpayers—lived high on the hog. But when the war ended so did the paycheck. Many Contras were young men who since adolescence had known no life other than that of armed hoodlums. So at the war's end they continued the only profession they knew. In lawless gangs they roamed the border area, robbing homes, assaulting busses, stealing cattle, trafficking drugs, and kidnapping for ransom. Many Honduran families along the border who had weathered the war fled after peace was declared. Some who had moved away during the war returned hopefully afterwards, only to discover that the violence and lawlessness continued—and so fled again.

But for those who left, finding a peaceful and productive place to live wasn't easy. In the years following the war, the wave of crime and violence spread through much of Honduras. Even in formerly peaceful cities like Tegucigalpa, now homes are often broken into and cars are stolen every day. To try to control the crime wave, the countryside swarms with heavily armed soldiers and police.

From what people told me, many police have become thugs and thieves themselves. Some sell their guns and uniforms

to hoodlums. This makes it hard to tell a real policeman from a crook in police clothing. Too often, alas, it comes to the same thing.



The owner of this homestead told me that during the war a group of Contras raped a neighbor girl and threw her body into a well. Such abuses were common and there was little local villagers could do about it.

Exodus to Gringolandia.

The combination of landmines along the border, floods and climate change throughout the country (with more devastating hurricanes), together with increased crime, violence, corruption, and police repression, has prompted countless Hondurans to look for greener pastures. Thousands have made their way through Mexico to enter the United States, mostly as undocumented workers. Over the years, an enclave of Honduran migrant workers settled along the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi.

How cruelly ironical their fate! A mass of Hondurans flees their country to escape the aftermath of the Contra War, the ravages of Hurricane Mitch, and other calamities—only to end devastated by Hurricane Katrina and the government's deadly failed response. They have learned the hard way; *their problems are of a global nature.*

Landmines and the Contra War -- a closer look

After the official end of the Nicaragua War, the border area of Honduras and Nicaragua was littered with hundreds of thousands of landmines. The United Nations declared it a disaster area, and cordoned off a ten-mile-wide strip of mountain forest, posting it as unsafe for anyone to enter.

The ongoing devastation of Honduras—including landmines, environmental demise, and social deterioration—resulting from the Contra War is particularly tragic because most Hondurans (and most Nicaraguans) wanted no part in the war.



A group of families with disabled children meet in the CBR center in Trojes—where children still fear injury from landmines and assaults from ex-Contras turned gangsters.

The war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was fomented and funded by the US “military industrial complex” for political and economic reasons. In the early 1980s, when the US decided to destabilize the Sandinistas by supporting the *Contra-revolutionaries*, it pressured the adjacent nations of Honduras and Costa Rica to allow their lands to be used for training the Contras and launching the attack. In exchange, the US offered the governments of these countries extensive military and development aid. Costa Rica resisted, but the Honduran oligarchy agreed. Like most Central American countries, Honduras had long been servile to US interests. A large part of its agribusiness and commerce were controlled by US corporations. Honduran statesmen were aware of how the US has historically responded to small Latin American countries that fail to comply to its wishes. So they tolerated the Contras, along with a strong (if covert) US military presence, who used their country as a base for invading Nicaragua.

Most Honduran citizens opposed their government's complicity with the US scheme. There were mass protests, especially in border towns, which were turned into a war zone. To quell the opposition, the US began its famous campaign to “win the hearts and minds of the people.” It inundated the countryside with hundreds of Peace Corp volunteers and community health centers staffed by US medics.

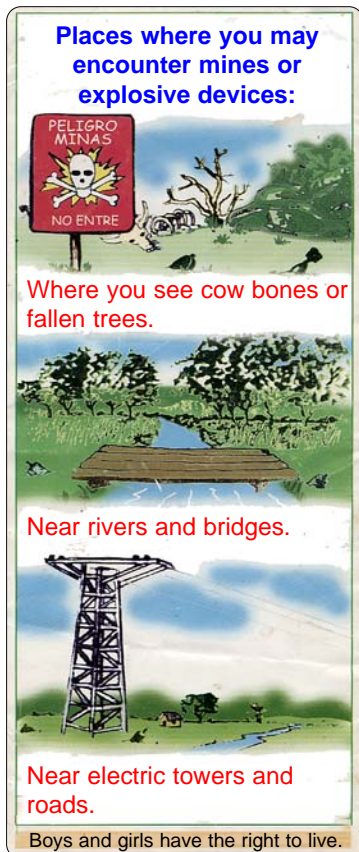
At that time, our organization received an order from the US Army for 300 copies of *Donde No Hay Doctor*, the Spanish edition of my book *Where There Is No Doctor*. We refused to sell them; we wanted no part in the US war on Nicaragua. But the Army got the books elsewhere.



Winning the hearts and minds of Hondurans.

during the war, the Peace Corps played two distinct roles. “On the surface,” he said, “it was good deeds and big smiles, and underneath, covert surveillance.” He explained how volunteers would try to win the trust of the people, to find out the names of persons actively opposed to the Contra war and the US role in it. Then those local “war resisters” would suffer an accident or mysteriously disappear.

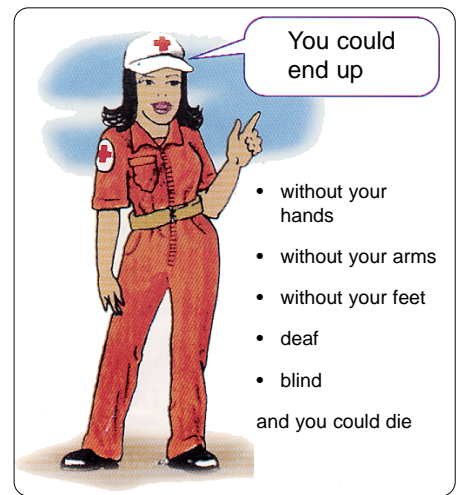
US shirks responsibility for harm done. The US government, which provided the mines and trained the Contras to plant them, has largely turned its back on the ongoing “collateral damage.”



Page from a flyer warning children about mines. Here we put English for Spanish.

Sadly, the US Peace Corps was dragged into the US military objectives. During the Contra War, Honduras had more Peace Corps volunteers than any other nation. On my recent visit to Honduras, a village health promoter in the border town of Trojes, made it clear to me that

the long history of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. The UN estimated that in 1999, a decade after the Contra War, over 100,000 landmines and other unexploded munitions still dotted the country-



From the same flyer warning children about landmines. This flyer was produced in Nicaragua, but is widely used in Honduras. (Again, we have substituted English for Spanish.)

side of Central America. Of these, approximately 73,000 were in Nicaragua and between 5,000 to 8,000 in Guatemala. Since the Organization of American States has removed thousands of landmines in recent years, Honduras has now been declared “landmine free,” but there is no guarantee that every mine has been removed.

A small number of landmines can make large areas of land uninhabitable. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines reports that “in 1996 ... a village in Mozambique, had been abandoned by the entire population of around 10,000 villagers due to alleged mine infestation. After three months of work, the deminers found four mines. Four mines had denied access to land and caused the migration of 10,000 people.”

Canada and Mexico to the rescue. While the American government has largely down-played this problem, fortunately the countries bordering the US have taken a far more responsible and humanitarian stand. In 1999, Mexico and Canada joined with the Panamerican Health Organization (the branch of the World Health Organization covering the Americas) to form the so-called *“Iniciativa Tripartita para la*

As the world’s biggest producer and exporter of landmines, the United States has repeatedly refused to sign the International Agreement to Ban the Manufacture and Sale of Landmines. Not surprisingly, therefore, the US tries to sweep under the carpet the whole issue of civilian landmine victims. And, sadly, US mass media have largely been complicit in this conspiracy of silence: *Don't look, don't tell!*

Leftover landmines The landmine danger in Honduras is, of course, only one part of the larger problem. Central America has been deeply impacted by mines placed during

Atención a Víctimas de Minas en Centroamérica" (Tri-party Initiative for Assisting Victims of Landmines in Central America).

From 1999 to 2003 the Tri-party Initiative joined the mine-defusing program of the Red Cross. It has introduced three measures to help landmine victims and their families "improve their quality of life."

The first measure was to provide **artificial limbs and mobility devices** to those who lost arms or legs. With this, the Barr Foundation, based in Florida (which has also assisted PROJIMO in Mexico) has helped by donating prosthetic components.

The second measure was to help these families with **home improvements**. It provides economic and technical support for improving buildings or roofs, by replacing pole and thatch walls with adobe block, and by constructing protected wells and water storage tanks.

The third measure was to help the landmine victims and their kin increase their income through "**productive family projects**"—providing the family with a start-up stock of pigs, goats, chicken, cattle, or other livestock.

On my visit to the CBR center in Trojes, I learned that 11 families of landmine victims had received such help. In one family that was helped, the mother and three children had been injured by a single mine, years after the war was over.

The *Tripartita* has been cooperating with the Community Based Rehabilitation program of the Juana Leclerc Institute. Landmine amputee Santos Barrientos, now President of the local CBR Committee, was one of the first recipients of a new leg.

Damage from the Contra War continues. Despite the good will and international assistance, the damages deriving from the Contra War continue to mount. The combination of migrating landmines, deforestation, increased flooding, and escalation of



Many poor families in Honduras depended on the money sent back by relatives in the US to help meet their needs—until Katrina struck.

delinquency and corruption have led to a mass exodus of farm families to the cities, where urban slums are mushrooming—and to the United States in search of safer conditions and higher wages. But often the "illegal aliens" in the US, again find life is difficult, dangerous, and unfair.

Looking at the larger picture, the whole world is still being hurt by the Contra War: The strategic deforestation of the border region destroyed thousands of acres of cloud forest with rare species of plants

and animals, reducing the biodiversity of the planet. The decimation of the forests adds to the overall trend of climate change and global warming—leading to more disasters like Hurricanes Mitch, Katrina, Wilma, and Stan. And others to come.

We all live on the same planet. The damages of war and greed that we sow in distant lands return home like boomerangs. Unless we can find a way to live in peace with one another and in balance with our imperiled environment, we will go the way of the Dodo. **Learn and live!**

A first step toward sustainable change is FULLER UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS. We the people need to know what is happening to this earth. We need to become better informed about what our leaders are up to, and why. We need to understand why what we call "democracy" and "development" are widening the gap between rich and poor, worldwide. And we need to find ways to collectively make participatory democracy and sustainable development work.

By helping one another to become better informed, we can collectively choose better leaders: ones who put the *well-being of all* before the shortsighted greed of a few.

Politics of Health Knowledge Network.

Sharing critical information about how "the larger picture" affects our collective health and survival is the intent of our HealthWrights web site,

www.politicsofhealth.org.

The site will be much more useful if it is **interactive**.

Please take part!



Mentally handicapped children from *Instituto Juana* sing at the Central American Seminar on CBR.

Announcing a new **NETWORK OF COMMUNITY BASED REHABILITATION PROGRAMS IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

In Honduras I took part in a "Central American Seminar on Community Based Rehabilitation." An important outcome was the formation of a new *Network of CBR Programs in Central America*. Several of us stressed the need for stronger leadership by disabled persons in CBR. After much debate, they decided that **at Network meetings at least 50% of participants should be disabled**. This is a huge step forward for CBR!

A liaison is also underway with the CBR Network in Mexico. Hooray!

Accomplishments and Challenges of a Community Based Rehabilitation Initiative in Honduras

The *Instituto Psicopedagógico Juana Leclerc* was set up 16 years ago in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, to respond to the needs of children with “dificiencia intelectual” (mental retardation and developmental delay). It started by assisting a few children with Down syndrome and has grown into the country’s leading institution for intellectually handicapped children, and more recently, for all categories of disabled children.

For the last few years the Instituto has been coordinating a Community Based Rehabilitation program which now covers much of the rural area of northern, western and southern Honduras.

In 2002 I was invited by the director of the *Instituto* to share experiences at a regional seminar on CBR, and to spend a few days visiting and “assessing” the *Instituto’s* community based program.

During my prior visit in 2002 I found that the program had many excellent features, but also significant weaknesses. Like so many of the CBR programs in Latin America and elsewhere, especially those that grow out of initiatives directed toward children with mental deficiency, this CBR program was especially good in the social side of rehabilitation: community awareness raising, daily living skills, special education, integration into normal schools



A group of coordinators, special teachers and local volunteers from the Juana Leclerc CBR program accompanied David Werner to visit disabled village children in their homes.

(including special preparation and assistance to school teachers), vocational training, and promotion of work opportunities. They were good at recruiting local volunteers and at mobilizing community committees and activities for inclusion and assistance to disabled persons.

The program was weakest in the therapeutic and technical side of rehabilitation. The program coordinators were well aware of this deficit—which was one reason they invited me back in 2005. They asked me to do a more complete assessment of the CBR program, giving special attention to the therapeutic and technical needs of physically and multiply disabled children, especially those children in need of individualized therapy or assistive devices.

Home and Community visits. Most of my two weeks in Honduras I spent visiting rural communities and homes in three of the districts covered by the program. Because the program leaders wanted to learn more about the technical side of rehabilitation, they took me to see those children who presented the biggest challenges to them. For this I give the team credit. They could have showed me only their “success stories.” But instead they took me to where they most needed new ideas and advice. This made it far more interesting and productive for everyone.

In fact, most of the children whose homes we visited had enormous unmet needs. Often those needs were unmet because no one knew quite where to begin. Yet with a little imagination and creativity, we found a lot could be done with local skills and materials, as part of the CBR process.

What I most appreciated was people’s eagerness to learn and openness to explore new approaches and possibilities. Through these open-ended home visits, the team developed many new ideas about what they could do through appropriate technology and participatory problem solving at the family and community levels.

Here I will describe just a few observations, focusing on some of the problems.

The need to integrate technical and social needs. The needs of most of the children we visited were complex. It was clear that their physical and social needs were interrelated and that neither could be met without adequately responding to both.



Marcos, for example, is a bright 23 year old youth with all 4 limbs paralyzed and contracted by polio. As a boy he began school but soon dropped out. We found him depressed and with very low self esteem. He could not move his new poorly designed wheelchair by himself, and preferred to crawl. The CBR team was at a loss as to how to help him.

When we asked Marcos what he thought might help, he had some good ideas. He wanted a tray on his wheelchair so he can draw and “learn to write.” Marcos’ younger brother is mentally slow and has repeated 2nd grade 3 times, but said he was eager to teach Marcos. That would be great for them both. We talked to a carpenter who agreed to make the tray at a height so Marcos can write with his hand and mouth. Once Marcos learns to write perhaps he



can begin to tutor slow learning children in the town, as a member of the CBR team. Marcos now has hopes for the future.

The strength of the Juana Leclerc CBR Program lies in the social rather than technical area. This stands to reason insofar as the coordinators of all three regions are social workers. While they do an excellent job in mobilizing community involvement and getting children into school, they do not have the background or training to adequately assist or advise on therapeutic and technical needs.

This technical shortcoming could be partly resolved if there were capable professional back-up services in larger towns, to which the CBR team could turn for referrals and

assistance. Unfortunately, however, when the CBR workers seek assistance or advice from local professionals, that which they get is too often substandard.

There is no school of physiotherapy in Honduras. Most of the few PTs in the country come from El Salvador.

What is more, too often the physiotherapists and other rehab specialists—including some of those who provide training or support services for the CBR program—fall in to an unimaginative routine. They tend to provide the same standard exercis-

es and assistive equipment to children with the same general disability, without adequately evaluating the individual needs and possibilities of each child.

Sadly, this situation—in which many physiotherapists and rehab experts fall into a thoughtless routine and thereby lose the opportunity to help children reach their full potential—is not unique to Honduras.

I have encountered this same problem in many countries I've visited. (For example, see Newsletter from the Sierra Madre #53/54 on Nicaragua, and #55 on India.)

Standardized equipment with inappropriate or harmful designs

Time and again, on our home visits, we saw assistive devices prescribed by experts in hospitals or rehabilitation centers that were inappropriate or even counterproduc-

tive for the children using them. The inadequacies weren't a question of cost. In fact many of the aids were quite costly. But they didn't meet the needs of the child. As

in other countries I have visited, the most consistently unsuitable assistive devices were standing frames, walkers, special seating, and wheelchairs.

Example of Luis:

Luis is a bright 4 year old with spastic cerebral palsy. While most children I saw were from very poor families, Luis' mother is a school teacher and the family is better off than many. His mother takes Luis regularly to an urban rehab center where he has been provided a variety of costly assistive devices, all in some ways ill-suited to the boy's needs.

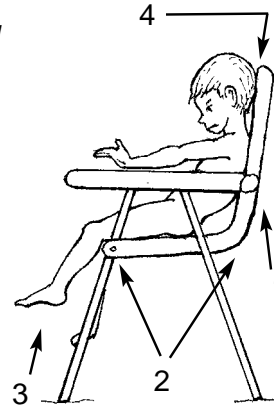


Luis' fancy high chair is of molded plastic with aluminum legs. But it has a number of problems:

1. The seat is horizontal and even angles forward a little, so the spastic child tends to scoot forward uncomfortably.

2. The seat is too deep. The child's butt is far in front of the seat back, causing slumping and hip extension, which triggers more spasticity.

3. There is no foot rest and the feet thrust forward.



4. The vertical backrest & head-rest are in the same plane.

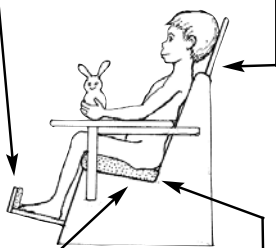
This pushes the child's head forward and down, causing more spastic back-pushing of the head.

As a result, Luis is miserable in his seat. It increases his spasticity, reducing control of his head, trunk, arms and hands. So he functions less well.

Luis might do better in a chair something like this:

Foot rest with front bar to keep knees bent and reduce spasticity

Head rest behind plane of back rest.



Seat with a sink for the butt, to reduce forward thrust

Seat and backrest at right angles and tilted back for comfort and stability.

Luis' standing frame has similar problems:

A high, straight-up-and-down backboard pushes his head forward and tilts his body forward, distressingly off balance.

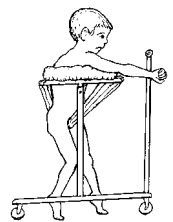


Fortunately his mother improved the frame somewhat by padding the board and tilting it a little backwards.

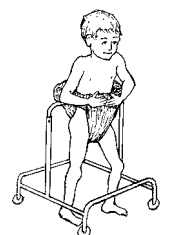
Luis' walker has a cloth seat that is so high he has to walk on tiptoes. This increases his spastic pattern and impedes walking.



Better would be a similar walker that lets him walk with his heels down.



Harmful



Better

All of these devices could be adapted to better meet the child's needs. The upsetting thing is that the experts who prescribed them didn't take the trouble.

Common Problems with Children's Wheelchairs

A few years ago the biggest problem for non-ambulatory children in poor countries was the lack of a wheelchair. Today many more children have wheelchairs. The problem is that very often the wheelchairs given to children don't meet their needs. International charities typically donate second-hand wheelchairs that are far too

big. Others provide fancy new wheelchairs that are poorly designed and quickly break down. There is too little concern for the needs of the individual child. As a result, thousands of children end up with ill-fitted wheelchairs that further limit the child's mobility, cause harmful posture and deformities, and may cause pressure sores.

And in the case of children with cerebral palsy, they tend to increase spasticity and decrease function, thereby holding back the child's development and self-reliance.

In Honduras most wheelchairs we saw children using were shockingly ill-suited for them. Here are a few examples:



The most common problem observed is that **the donated wheelchairs are far too big for the children**. This is true both for second-hand chairs (left and center) and for lovely new chairs (above right).



In Honduras, as in many countries, well publicized ceremonies are occasionally held in which the President's or Governor's wife, or an international charity, gives shiny new wheelchairs to poor disabled children. One of the most common brands of wheelchair comes from *The Wheelchair Foundation*, which distributes

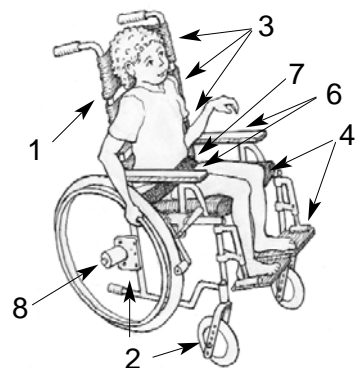
worldwide cheaply made wheelchairs from China. While these chairs have some good features, they have **serious design problems** that make them unsuitable for most children. *But with simple modifications in design, allowing more adaptability, these chairs could meet the needs of many more children.*

Problems with the standard donated chair:

1. Backrest is too up-right and seat too level, causing discomfort and slipping out of the chair.
2. Height of front and rear wheels don't adjust enough to tilt the chair sufficiently backward.
3. The cloth backrest is too high for many children and pushes head forward and down. (Some children need head support, but many don't.)
4. The footrests are much too low for many children, and can't be raised enough to reach the feet.
5. The chair is wide enough to fit a very obese child, but far too wide for most children.
6. Armrests are too high for many children to reach wheels and move the wheelchair themselves.
7. Seat belt is fixed too high on the seat back, or too far forward on seat, so child can slip underneath.
8. Bearings and many other components are weak, they break quickly—and are hard to replace locally.
9. No instructions are provided on how to evaluate the child's needs and adapt the wheelchair accordingly.



Chair showing typical problems



Design with recommended changes

Suggested design modifications:

1. Redesign the chair so it can be easily tilted farther back—adjustable to each child's needs.
2. Longer front wheel forks with more holes, and adjustable rear wheel height, will allow more tilt.
3. Backrest could be made with 3 horizontal cloth bands, so height and positioning of head can be modified to meet each child's needs.
4. Redesign footrests for higher adjustment, and so knees can be at right angles (for less spasticity).
5. Chairs should come in different widths, or be adjustable, (see *Nothing About Us Without Us*, p 190).
6. Armrests should be lower, or adjustable—and longer, to better accommodate a table or tray.
7. Seat belt should be attached at the back corners of the seat, so it fits low and tight across the hips.
8. Bearings and other components should be easy to replace with locally available supplies at low cost.
9. A pamphlet should be provided with the wheelchairs, along with a few simple tools, so rehab workers and families can easily adapt the chair to the child's needs.

Every effort should be made to assure that wheelchairs are designed for easy adaptation to each child's needs.

HealthWrights, in cooperation with other children's rights groups, is developing guidelines and instructional materials.

For a **Slide show on Wheelchairs designed for each child**, by PROJIMO, see www.healthwrights.org/sillas/index.htm

By Bruce Hobson

In December, 2005, I traveled to Mississippi and New Orleans to meet with Latino immigrant survivors of Hurricane Katrina and immigrant support organizations. I timed my trip so that I could attend a Katrina survivors conference in Jackson and a march in New Orleans, both organized by the People's Hurricane Relief Fund.

Over 500 people, overwhelmingly African-American, filled a large church to capacity for this conference. Nearly 100 of the participants were survivors. Several of the organizers had long histories of struggle going back to the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. To be in the presence of these people in the heart of the African-American South just months after Katrina was humbling.

At this event I expected to learn about the thousands of Honduran immigrant survivors in New Orleans and how many had, I had been told, "disappeared." The Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance (MIRA!) estimates that 140,000 to 150,000 Hondurans had lived in New Orleans, making it the largest Honduran expatriate community in the world. Many thousands of them remain missing.

I had hoped to discover how the hurricane and ensuing floods had affected them and why there was virtually no reporting of their plight in the mainstream press. But no Latino/a survivors were at the conference, nor anyone to speak for them. The conference was a powerful event, though not without weaknesses. The gender imbalance (virtually all men) of the organizers and speakers was, at best, uncomfortable.

That no Latino survivors attended this historic event seemed odd. I had expected that immigrants, either Latino/a or Vietnamese, would have played an important role. The exception was a Vietnamese Catholic priest from Plaquemines Parish—a small community at the mouth of the Mississippi—

who spoke about the destruction of his entire community. He was the only Vietnamese represented at the conference, and his talk was moving.

The march and rally held the day after in New Orleans was impressive. People's spirits were high, the chants were inspiring, and we got a lesson on the history of the civil rights movement in New Orleans.

The main demands articulated were:

- Survivors' right to return to their communities.
- Immediate, decent temporary housing.
- An end to evictions.
- Clean up and removal of the toxic topsoil throughout the Lower Ninth Ward.
- Free or low-cost health services.
- Temporary schools for all children, not just for those of the wealthy.
- Preferential hiring to survivors for rebuilding their communities.

The creation of a Black Emergency Management Alliance as a body to replace FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) was mentioned several times.

After the rally I traveled throughout New Orleans and into the bayou with a survivor from Verette Village in St. Bernard Parish. There is water on the bayou everywhere, even in the dry season. And there are alligators and armadillos. Like many others, Clara Rita Barthelemy survived the hurricane and flood by lashing her body to

exposed roof timbers at the top of her tall house. After hours like this a White couple in a small motorboat heard her screams and attempted to rescue her. But approaching her roof, their boat

capsized in the roiling 18 feet of water and they both quickly drowned. Clara Rita assumed that in just hours the water would take her as well. In the evening, however, another boat came through and rescued her.



Clara Rita



Clara Rita searches for family photos

I climbed into her destroyed house where she had lived for many years to help search for photographs and her few retrievable personal items. It was inside her home that the impact of Katrina showed its full human dimension to me.

Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance

I met with Bill Chandler, director of MIRA!, at his small office in Jackson. We talked about the history of Honduran immigration, and how Hondurans and other immigrants fared the disaster. We agreed that supporting alliances between Latinos and the Black community was critical toward building a powerful force for struggle and democracy in the South, as well as for confronting some historical contradictions between these two oppressed peoples. There are plenty of



Protesters march in New Orleans for justice

examples of Southern politicians who use these divisions between Blacks and Latinos to enhance their own position within the business class. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin is a case in point. At a forum with business leaders, he asked "How do I make sure New Orleans is not overrun with Mexican workers?" At the rally in New Orleans, well-known community activist Mama D loudly proclaimed that, "Ray Nagin don't *know* he don't know!"

Extreme poverty

Bill echoed David Werner's observations when he spoke of some of the factors that have driven Honduran immigration over the past few decades. One is, of course, the reality that working people in Central America are desperate to survive and to provide for their families. Drawn by the economic magnet of El Norte they are willing to take enormous risks to emigrate. The US supported Contra War against Nicaragua, and 1998's Hurricane Mitch have significantly intensified poverty and social disintegration in Honduras. For many, emigrating north has been the most logical, though dangerous, option. But since Vicente Fox has been Mexico's president there are now new obstacles for undocumented Central Americans.

US dictating immigration policy at Mexico's southern border

US Immigration has created a new way for corrupt Mexican border officials to extort money from their Latino neighbors. According to the July 2003 *Le Monde Diplomatique*, "As soon as he was sworn in as president of Mexico in February 2001, Vicente Fox played host to US President George W. Bush and brought up the crucial matter of immigration agreements between the countries. That April, during meetings between Mexican officials and the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, the Mexican government spokesman, Santiago Creel, told the press: 'In exchange for greater facilities for Mexicans working in the US, our government is prepared to increase measures

aiming to arrest foreigners (Central Americans) crossing the country heading for the US.' President Vicente Fox of the right-wing PAN party considers Ronald Reagan his greatest political inspiration." (Reagan's legacy is infamous in Central America. It was he who once brazenly wore a tee-shirt at a press conference with the emblem "I'm a Contra.")

The US-sponsored war against Nicaragua

During the war in Nicaragua, Honduras was used as a northern base of operations by the Contras and the US. Honduras, then the second poorest country in the hemisphere (after Haiti), was filled with the culture of war, instability, and social degradation. While working in Honduras in 1989 I saw Contras swaggering in and out of hotels and bars with their M16s and sunglasses, often dressed in expensive clothes. Their presence and that of the US military colored much of Honduran life in the 1980s. The US military, for example, would enter small towns unannounced to "help the poor" with absurd projects like drilling wells where the people knew there was no water below the ground! I saw these dry, abandoned holes first hand in various places in the town of Choluteca.

Hurricane Mitch

Thousands from Central America, particularly from Honduras, arrived in the US after Hurricane Mitch battered the region in 1998. Agriculture was devastated as were the lives of the poor in the countryside. Former Honduran President Carlos Flores Facusse warned that a new wave of migrants would go "walking, swimming and running up north" unless the United

States helps Central America get back on its feet. During the three-month period after Mitch struck, an estimated 6,000 undocumented Central American migrants were captured and detained along the Texas-Mexico border; more than half were from Honduras.

From Central America to the Gulf States

Hondurans seeking to get to the US by land can expect the nearly three thousand miles to the US-Mexican border to be a potentially brutal endeavor. For those who make it to the northern border the hardest part of the journey is right in front of them. The going rate for a "coyote" to provide (unguaranteed) passage into California, Arizona, New Mexico or Texas runs from \$2600 to \$3000 USD. For those who cannot pay, crossing the desert can be deadly.

Getting across alive has its rewards, to be sure, and the massive cleanup from Katrina and the floods has created a huge job market. Undocumented Latino workers are typically those who take the dirtiest, lowest paying jobs. A typical job is the removal of stinking, chemical-laden insulation out of businesses. But there are other dangers besides exposure to the toxic detritus. For example, on September 28, US Marshals raided a Red Cross shelter in Long Beach, Mississippi. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, they blocked the exits and briefly detained about 60 people who appeared Latino. The shelter residents, including workers and hurricane victims, were told they would be arrested if they did not leave. Most left the next day.

Bananas and migration north

For decades, all social classes of Hondurans have settled in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region; most are working people and many are undocumented. Over the years many who worked in the banana industry back home would put onto the boats headed up the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans to seek work. Many found employment there and at



Toxic Insulation poses a serious health hazard to workers cleaning up after Katrina.

banana distribution points farther north along the Mississippi River. People working in the banana plantations back home often have family members working in the US unloading bananas up the Mississippi.

Mira's Bill Chandler explained to me that Hondurans who remained in New Orleans have reported that Red Cross volunteers would request their legal status prior to providing aid. The Red Cross, however, states this is not their policy and asks people to report any volunteers who are not providing care to all who need it. But people's fears are probably well-founded considering, for example, the Red Cross's reputation for enforcing evictions of Black people in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, the area most affected by the flooding.

Where did the Hondurans go?

After Katrina, in light of FEMA's non-response to the hundreds of thousands of poor and working-class Black people, it wasn't difficult to understand why Latino immigrants would expect no better treatment. Hondurans' fear of arrest and deportation if they were to ask for shelter and food is completely understandable.

Victoria Cintra, community outreach organizer for MIRA! in Gulfport, explained that many survivors escaped the area, traveling to other states seeking work and housing. Some found that their only chance of support was from non-profit and faith-based groups who welcomed them into shelters, though it seemed that these were relatively few. Some may have returned home, but it is impossible to know how

the country, organizing for their right to return is difficult. Survivors in shelters, churches, hotels and people's homes are spread throughout San Francisco, North Carolina, Texas, and elsewhere.

The entire South and Southwest—the Sunbelt—is changing, and Latinos are part of this change. Promoting unity between Katrina survivors of all races, and advancing Black/Latino unity is essential in the fight for justice and democracy. Meanwhile, the powers that be have their eyes on the devastated Lower Ninth Ward. A massive Disneyland-style casino-based tourist sprawl could well replace this historic part of the South. Supporting Katrina survivor organizations and promoting education about ongoing campaigns for justice can be undertaken in communities anywhere.



This slave house was built nearly 200 years ago and had been inhabited continually until Katrina. Even so, it still stands.

For the first few days after the hurricane, some Honduran immigrants were reported to be sneaking into shelters at night for water, fearing to show themselves during the day. While some Hondurans with family in the Gulf Coast region are posting their names on Internet search lists seeking information about victims, many family members of undocumented Hondurans refuse to do so, for fear of causing immigration problems for their loved ones.

many, and how they may have fared on the trip south is anyone's guess. And then there are the uncounted who did not survive Katrina.

Dispersion of survivors and building unity

It seems that, despite being roundly criticized for their racist non-response to Katrina, Bush and company presently have the upper hand. Given the dispersion of the African-American survivors throughout

Organizations that support Katrina survivors:

People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight (Community Labor United)
www.communitylaborunited.net/

Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance (in partnership with Oxfam America)
www.oxfamamerica.org/

Common Ground Collective
<http://www.commongroundrelief.org/>

Suggested reading:

The Mysteries of New Orleans: Twenty-five Questions about the Murder of the Big Easy, By Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=8828>

Divided We Fall, By David Bacon
<http://www.dsausa.org/DavidBacon/Divided%20We%20Fall.html>

Bruce Hobson is a founding board member of HealthWrights who lived in rural México for many years. He was a student of David Werner in the 1960s and in the 1980s worked as a team member of Proyecto PROJIMO. He later coordinated a community-based rehabilitation program on the coast of Jalisco, México and from 1993 through 1996 he worked through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the Chiapas jungle training Guatemalan refugees basic rehabilitative skills and program development.

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April 2006

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This young woman in Honduras, whose legs and hips are paralyzed by polio, uses a wheelchair but is very eager to walk—and since her arms are very strong, she has good potential. Here, at a village rehabilitation center, David Werner draws a parapodium on the blackboard, which may be the best way for her to begin walking.

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*"Even in an age of commerce we need
enclaves in our society where the views
that are expressed have not been pur-
chased."*

-- John Polani (Nobel Prize
Winner/Chemistry in 1986)