

Update from the Centro Pastoral of the Eastern Missions

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As the rainy season begins, we find ourselves surrounded by the 3 “m’s” of winter: mud, mildew and mosquitoes. Fortunately it also brings beautifully green hills, fatter livestock, and growing corn. The change is a welcome one; the weather is cooler, crisper, and more mystical. Many different projects have been keeping us busy in El Carmen, San Juan de Letran, and the Bajo Lempa area.



Hasta La Cosecha: Agriculture Project

We are nearing the end of a long diagnostic process with the agriculture project. After seeing presentations from different potential partner organizations, the Cristosal Board decided to work with *La Coordinadora del Bajo Lempa*. The *Coordinadora* is a grassroots Salvadoran community organization and development group that has been



A diagnostic workshop with the community and technicians

working in the area since 1996. We have been working with the agriculture technicians and community members to diagnose the issues, priorities, and potential solutions of these problems with the agricultural systems in the communities.

From this process we now have ready a project profile and budget that includes three stages. The first two stages are simultaneous. The first stage is agriculture education and formation, in which, people have signed up to participate in the *Coordinadora*’s agriculture school. The second stage is a family garden project in which the families will experiment with alternative production methods, learned at the school, while bettering family nutrition. They will have the accompaniment of the technicians as they work to diversify their production and try organic methods. In this



Two residents of La Chacastera (Bajo Lempa) working in their cornfield

time of a global food crisis, with ever-rising agro-chemical costs, this work could not be more important. In the third stage the families will transfer the skills learned and experiences had into a larger scale alternative production project. In which we are exploring artesian pumps (that run on water pressure alone) supplying a collective irrigation system that will allow



Taking a survey of the agriculture land in San Juan de LeTran

farmers to produce a diverse range of crops year round. In this third stage farmers will work with the technicians to develop family farm plans, and will have the option to take advantage of several different loan options. If you are interested in learning more about this project or supporting this endeavor please check back on the website soon for a complete project profile!

A Road for El Carmen: Bridge Project

As most of you know, and thanks to the support of many of you, we have been working to build a road to El Carmen. This road/bridge will provide access to this geographically marginalized community year round. The bridge is finished, the road has been cut, and all that is left is some clean up work. The community members worked six mornings a week for about 3 months to build the rock and cement bridge. The mayor's office cut the new road across the bridge, but due to some poor timing (the rain started



Looking down on the bridge from where the road goes now

right after) it got pretty muddy. They have promised to re-cut the road the road and steamroll it as soon as we get a dry spell.

The nearly finished bridge

Additionally, we are going to reforest the hilly part of the road to help control erosion. We are looking forward to inaugurating the bridge once everything is finished and looking tidy. This has been a massive effort on the part of the community, visiting groups, and everyone who supported the effort financially. Thank you!

Youth Garden Project: El Carmen

We are working with the youth of El Carmen to design and start a community garden. This project complements the larger organic and sustainable agriculture project (*Hasta La Cosecha*). The garden project has four objectives. It will be a teaching site for organic and sustainable agriculture techniques; the youth will learn leadership and technical skills; it will raise funds for the youth; and will better community nutrition by providing fresh produce for these communities whose market access is difficult.



Ten youths: ages 10-19



Alvaro helps out in a workshop about organic inputs

The project is designed to develop the leadership potential of all the youths involved. The youth are engaged in every aspect of the project to give them ownership and make the project sustainable.

Right now we are harvesting our first crop of: tomatoes, green



Checking for pest damage

peppers, cucumbers and squash. We are building a greenhouse as well as starting a seed bank. We are also starting a composting system and making almost all of our own organic insecticides and fertilizers. The youth are extremely animated about this project and work in the garden almost everyday after school. At one point iguanas were sneaking into the garden and eating the pepper plants, so the kids (on their own) started guarding the garden 24 hours a day. They took 2-hour shifts through the day and night for 2 weeks straight! They are an incredible group of young people.

Audrey giving a workshop during a storm

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An educational field trip to the Coordinadora's experimental farm in Ciudad Romero



Other Projects in the Bajo Lempa Area



The community of Los Calix donated a parcel of land to build a church for the *Cristo Rey* congregation. We are also negotiating the purchase of an adjoining parcel. The idea is to build a church that doubles as a flood shelter. Check back on the website for an update of this project as well.

Additionally, we are working with Jose Lopez, of the Church's Human Rights Office and representatives from the Office of the Attorney

General for Human Rights on a special project. The government is planning to expand and pave the road from *La Canoa* to *Isla de Mendez* as part of a push to develop elite

beachfront hotels. The residents are being told that the paved road will improve their quality of life and are under fierce pressure from government lawyers and delegations to donate their land and property to allow this to happen. For many in the area these claims are nearly comical, as the same government ministries have on multiple occasions stolen money and neglected to build a levy on the nearby river *Lempa*. The joke on the street is that floodwaters rise on paved roads the same as dirt ones. For people who suffered 12 years of civil war to gain access to land, donating back to the government is hard to swallow. The communities have adopted the battle cry “*este tierra no se doné, nos costó sudor y sangre*” (This land won’t be donated, it cost us sweat and blood). They have organized a committee to fight for just compensation for their losses. According to our recent survey, the people in 4 different communities calculate their land and property (houses, latrines, fruit trees, etc.) losses to be \$342,000. In one survey a man calculated the value of his house to be 28 pieces of corrugated metal (valued at \$512). Are these the people who should pay to pave the road for a multimillion-dollar hotel network?



We would also like to thank everyone who responded to the Companions of Cristosal request to help us purchase a new truck. Hopefully, we’ll be installed in a truck within the next few weeks! Your support makes all of this work possible.

(All photos by Audrey Denney)