

## **CONACASTE, GUATEMALA**

Conacaste, Guatemala, is located about an hour by car from the capital of Guatemala City. At the end of the rainy season the countryside looks quite green (Figure 33), but water was a major problem in the dry season. The houses were made of mud bricks with clay tile roofs. The houses had no chimneys.

Cooking fires were built in the houses and smoke was allowed to escape at the open eaves of the roof.

One consultant suggested that chimneys over the cooking fires would make the houses less smoky.

Dogs were allowed to run free (Figure 34). Many dogs did not belong to owners. Walking through the dark village at night with a pack of dogs following and barking was a frightening experience. Yet people constantly fed the dogs scraps of food. The dogs constituted a health hazard and a hazard to children. During the planning conference it was suggested that the female dogs be spayed and that pet dogs be kept on a leash. Eventually, the only dogs in the village would be pets.

Additional latrines had to be built for the conference (Figure 35). Consultants were housed in people's homes. Some of the newer homes were built of concrete blocks with corrugated metal roofs. The metal beds were loaned by the army (Figure 36). I was told where to put the bed and my bag, because the roof leaked in some places. The officer who arranged for the beds was shot to death on the porch of his home a few days before the conference began. Guatemala has a high level of political violence, like much of Central America.

The assembly building where we met had been enlarged with extensions on each side (Figure 37). Down the center of the ceiling were the map-based symbols of other Human Development Projects around the world. The message that went with these symbols was that Conacaste was no longer a remote, forgotten village. Rather, it was now one of a very few villages that were being called upon to show thousands of other villages what could be accomplished when people work together and care about each other (Figures 38 and 39). The local people were told that the presence of the consultants was proof that people elsewhere know about them and care about them. They were told that they should work to implement the projects that they were planning not only to help themselves but also to show other people that they, too, can improve their lives.

The meetings were usually opened and closed with songs. This practice gave people a chance to learn songs about community development and created a festive atmosphere. The songs also served as examples for additional songs and, unexpectedly, created a desire, particularly by the young people, to learn English, since most of the songs were in English.

A woman from an earlier Human Development Project attended the planning conference in Conacaste in order to testify to what had been achieved in her village. The woman had founded a sewing business in the village of Cano Negro, Venezuela, the first ICA project in Latin America (Figure 40).



Figure 33. A road in Conacaste, Guatemala



Figure 34. Dogs running loose in the village



Figure 35. Building additional latrines



Figure 36. Army metal bed in a new house

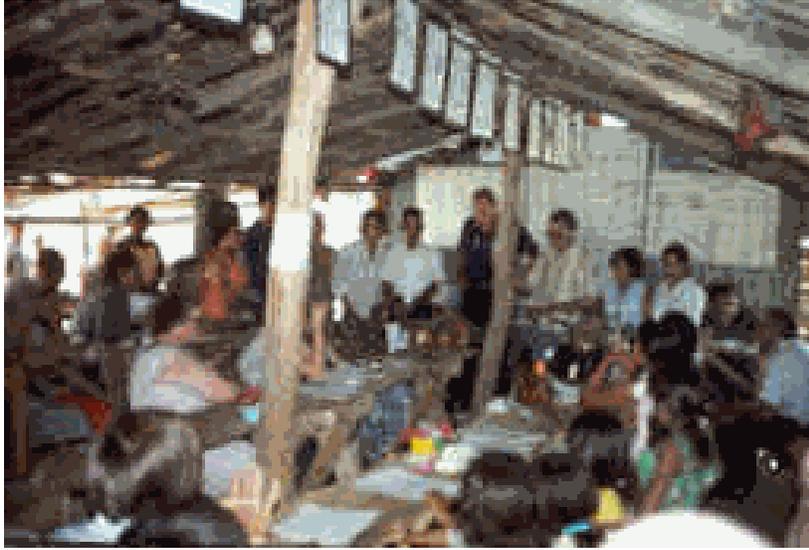


Figure 37. The assembly building

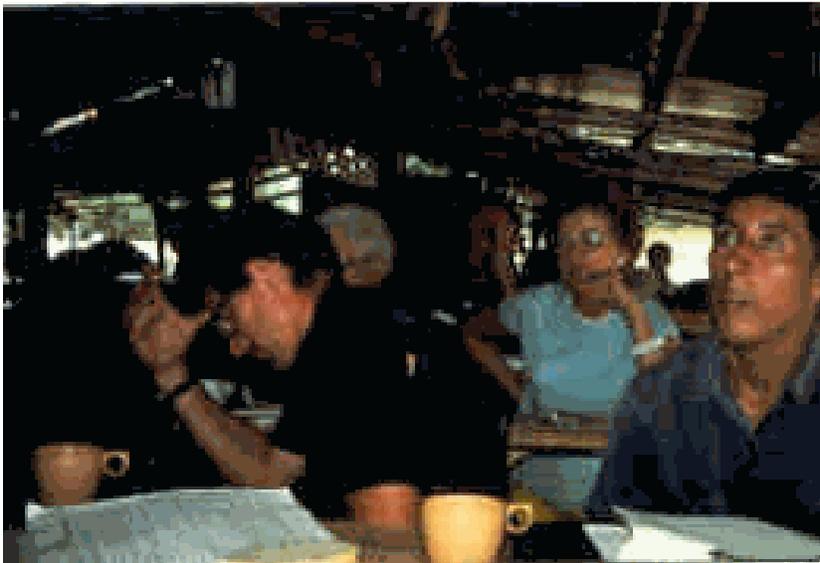


Figure 38. Reviewing the findings from the first day



Figure 39. Discussing items that were generated in groups

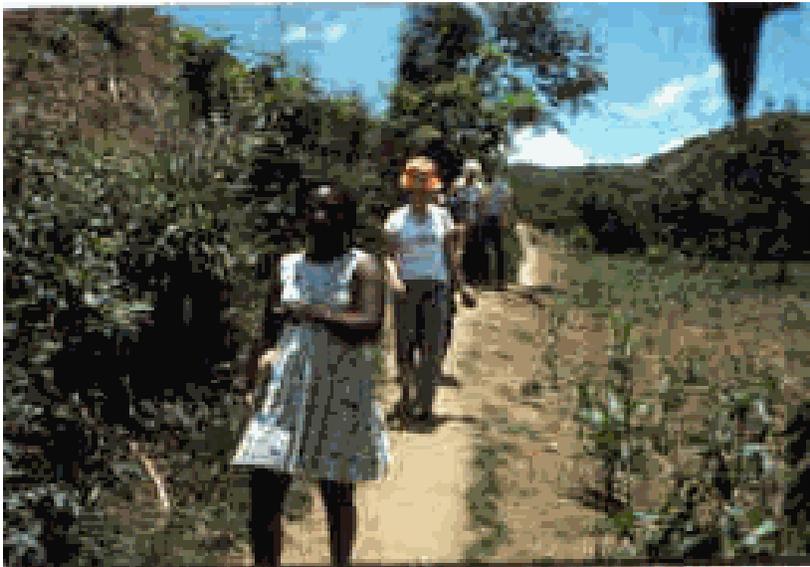


Figure 40. A community leader from Cano Negro, Venezuela

Some of the water in Conacaste was collected in barrels that caught the run-off from roofs, but much of the water was carried by women in jugs from wells dug by hand (Figure 41). One reason why water was such a problem in this village is that a recent earthquake had lowered the water table.

The village has an interesting history. Back in the 1930's there was a land reform program. At that time every family received a plot of land of equal size. Some of the families had a large number of children and either had to divide the land up among the children and/or some of the children had to move to the city. Those families who had only a few children were more prosperous because there was more land to

feed each person. We discussed this situation one evening after dinner (Figure 42). When I pointed out that the families that had only a few children were more prosperous, the people seemed stunned.

Apparently, they had been taught that it was good to have large numbers of children. The people left early that night. I worried that I had offended them. But many more people attended the next day, and they were very attentive.

### ***An Underlying Source of Tension***

The land reform of the 1930's had another very important effect on life in the village. When the land was divided up, some plots were better than others. In particular, some of the plots had water and some did not. Those people who had water on their land were in a position to supply water to their neighbors, whereas those who did not have water had to ask for water from their neighbors. Although there was much talk about buying water, the story that people told about the village was that those who had water would always give it to those who needed it. But whether a well was located on public or private land was a very important fact about a well. Also, I had noticed that some of the people in the village were very proud. They had a quiet dignity and carried themselves with unusual grace. It turned out that these were the people who did not have water. At one of the plenary sessions, I offered the explanation that those people who did not have water were in fact paying for it with pride and self-respect. They constantly had to reconstruct their pride in order to give some of it away in exchange for water.

The local people were moved by this explanation. No one contradicted this interpretation. Instead, the way water was discussed changed. Immediately, the building of a public well in the center of the village became a top priority. Previously ease of access to water determined one's rank in the village. But once the issue of water was openly discussed, and attention was focused on how water affected people's self-respect, attitudes regarding water changed dramatically. The community seemed to be more unified than it had been before. It was as though they now understood many puzzling tensions and antagonisms.



Figure 41. Drawing water from a well



Figure 42. Discussing the day's events over dinner

On the two field trips outside the village we visited a cement plant (Figure 43) and a double-knit weaving factory (Figure 44). The factory was owned by a German company that sold the material in the U.S. and

Europe. The machines were very sophisticated. The foreman, who wore a pistol in his belt, said he would save scraps of material for us and gave us some samples. One of the women said that she would make the scraps into dresses for children. On the way back through the city we were stopped and searched for guns or bombs (Figure 45). There was a national election in the country that day and the police were afraid that people might bring guns into the city.

### ***Principles of Village Economics***

I was put in charge of the business team for this planning conference. The approach to economics that the Institute uses in its projects is simple but effective.

1. Increase the amount of money brought into the village by selling agricultural products or manufactured goods.
2. Reduce the amount of money flowing out by providing goods and services inside the village.
3. Increase the number of times that money changes hands before it leaves by providing more services, for example restaurants, laundries, and hair styling salons.
4. Increase skills through education and cooperatives that bring in speakers on business and agricultural topics.
5. Obtain equipment through donations, grants, or by pooling resources.

In this village, a major cause of money flowing out was that people bought their bread in a neighboring town. We found a woman who was willing to begin a bakery to keep some of this money in the village. She would still have to buy flour and other ingredients, but the work of the bakery would be inside the village. Another woman said that she wanted to establish a hairdressing salon in her home, and we encouraged her to do so. By the last day of the conference one woman had made some dresses, one woman had baked some bread, and several people had made signs labeling these two businesses (Figure 46). The word "Panadaria" means "bakery" (Figures 47 and 48).

The team that was concerned with public works set out to define the town square more clearly (Figure 49). Previously cars and trucks had been parked almost anywhere in the center of town. The people wanted certain areas to be limited to pedestrians. So they found some rocks to serve as markers and painted them white. They also widened and straightened out some of the roads near the center of town (Figure 50).

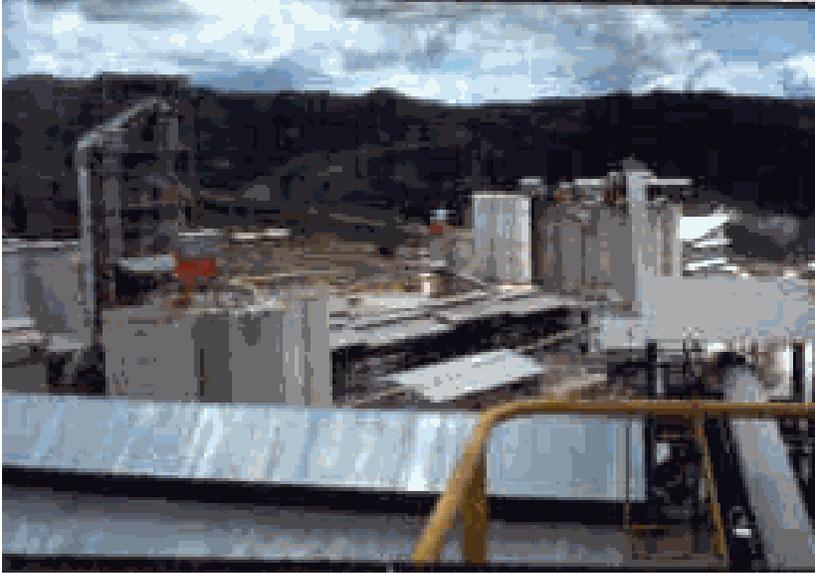


Figure 43. A nearby cement plant



Figure 44. A double-knit weaving factory

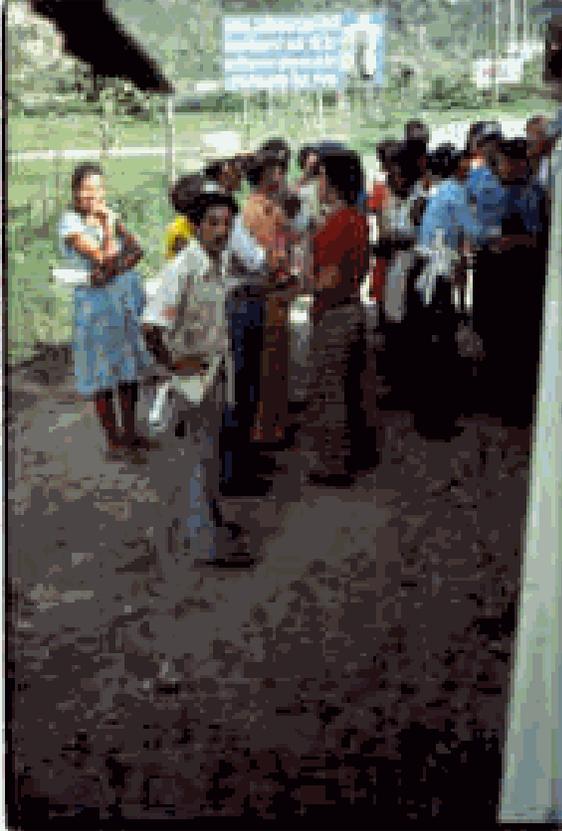


Figure 45. Being searched by police while entering Guatemala City



Figure 46. Making signs for the bakery and the sewing shop

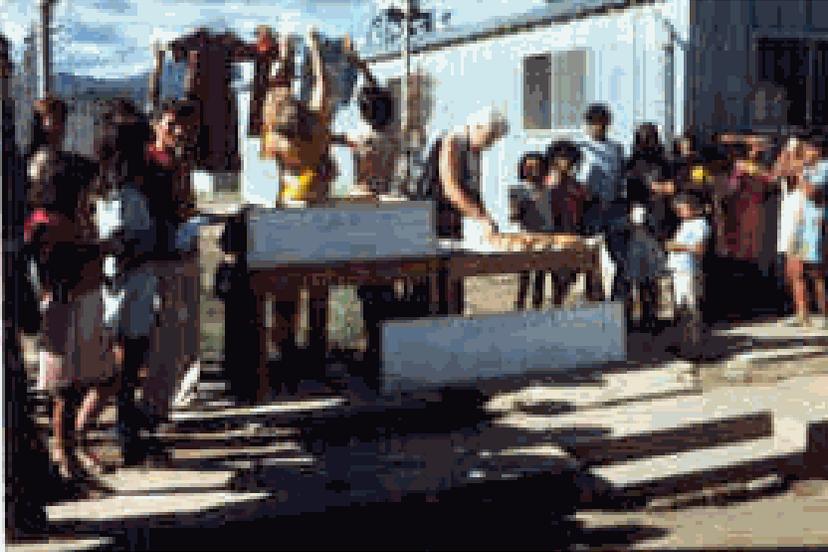


Figure 47. The first products from the bakery and the sewing shop

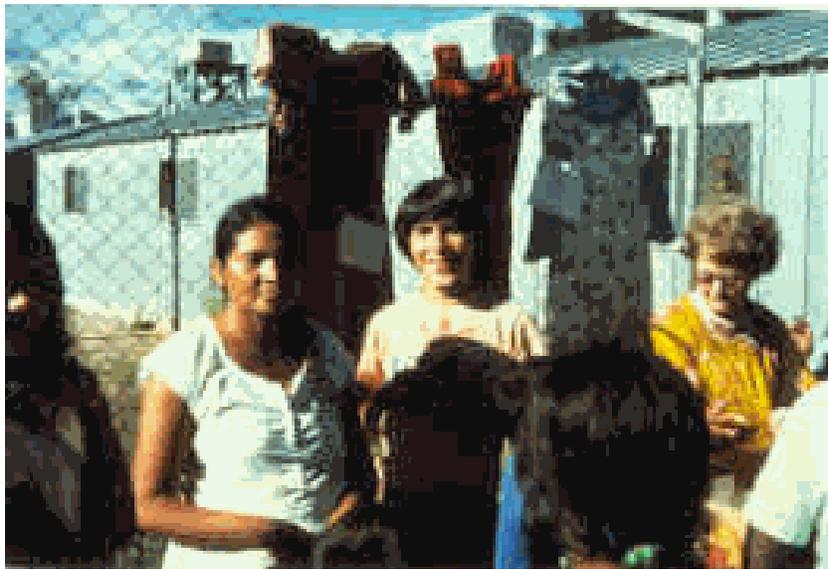


Figure 48. The local seamstress and a Peruvian song writer



Figure 49. Marking the pedestrian areas in the town square



Figure 50. Straightening out the road through town