

**Trip Report: El Salvador
March 7-15, 2013**

Introduction

The community of Valle Nuevo formed in the 1980s from among Salvadoran refugees of the Mesa Grande camp in Honduras. In 1989, the group returned to north-central El Salvador, and settled in the town of Santa Marta. In 2009 WHRI first visited the mountainous farming community at the invitation of the Valle Nuevo *Directiva* (elders). Over the past three years, we have focused on developing agricultural opportunities for their youth, particularly in the area of vegetable production. We have also begun working with the broader Santa Marta community, and with the *Asociación de Desarrollo Económico y Social de Santa Marta* (ADES), a local Salvadoran NGO formed at the time of the return from Honduras and a major player in most development efforts in the area.

This trip included Victor Hinojosa, former WHRI Board of Directors President and current Chair of our International Programs Committee, and Neil Rowe Miller, for whom this was the eighth visit to the community. Our focus was on better defining our partner relationships, especially in light of the revival of a Valle Nuevo farmers' cooperative and major changes in the funding and organization of ADES. We also consulted on and discussed vegetable production and other agricultural opportunities, and joined a group of Santa Marta residents for a trip to Mesa Grande in Honduras.

Partnership Discussions

A major goal of WHRI's international programs this year has been to better define and communicate the nature of our relationships with partner organizations. This process has involved literature research and internal discussion regarding critical aspects of these relationships, particularly our commitment to long-term involvement and clearer definition of the roles our partners wish for us to play. This trip was the first attempt at carrying out such discussions with our Salvadoran partners.

We were pleased by the impact of openly stating our commitment to working with each group long-term, not just with individual projects. Although this idea has been part of our internal discussion for years, we clearly had not communicated it, and the message was warmly received. Juana Layines responded enthusiastically, "That's what we want. Your friendship has value well beyond projects!" Victor's presence, as a former Board President seemed to reinforce this idea. The ADES leadership seemed especially pleased to know that our interests extend beyond Neil's periodic visits and specific projects, and instead involve a long-term commitment of the whole organization.



Peter Natáran and Victor Hinojosa examine the entrance to a cave where residents hid during the war.

Our historical involvement with both of these partners has involved only very modest funding (less than \$1,000 each). As such, they are *not* typical of most north-south NGO partnerships, and we wished to

make certain this pattern had not created disappointment or confusion. ADES personnel asked for more specific clarification, and after we supplied dollar figures of projects we have funded in Haiti (in the \$6,000-30,000 range) they seemed satisfied and stated that they see our main role as providing technical advice and help with planning.

The insignificance of the funding component of these relationships has allowed them to develop with relatively few strings attached. While we have found this refreshing, it also inhibits our ability to influence decision making or ask for accountability from these partners. We did not, for example, feel ready to discuss their accountability to us nor did they offer such. Since it is critical that we stay informed of progress and issues in the community, we will need to discuss these issues in the future. Both organizations seem open to sharing information, and we are pleased with the level of trust we have developed. However, in the absence of the leverage of funding, the onus of communication will likely remain on us.

Directiva/Cooperative projects

The recently-launched grain processing project of the Valle Nuevo Cooperative clearly dominates the discussion and activities of the *Directiva*. 80-90% of the leaders serve in both groups, and when we asked for a discussion with the *Directiva*, we ended up meeting with the Cooperative leadership. During our stay, Pastor Torres and Pedro Membreño spent time each day trouble-shooting the grain processing machinery, going over records, and undergoing training. We were pleased to attend a training session led by the representative of the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) who has been coming three times per week to work with the Cooperative. He was quite complimentary, and stated that the Valle Nuevo project is one of the stronger groups he works with.

In addition to grain processing equipment (a corn/sorghum thresher, grinder and mixer run by diesel engines), the \$24,000 grant issued by the MOA is being used to buy office equipment including a computer so that they can prepare mandatory monthly financial reports. Since none of the adult Cooperative members are computer literate, they decided to recruit 17 youth from the community to attend the training sessions and begin a one-year associate status after which they will be eligible to join the cooperative. Their hope is that this will provide an opportunity for the youth to eventually assume leadership of both the cooperative and the *Directiva*.

Roughly 60,000 lbs of corn has been shelled to date, providing an income of around \$3,000. Their business plan includes grinding, mixing, and selling animal feed in addition to shelling corn for human consumption. Two Valle Nuevo youth are employed to run the machinery, including one with two years of diesel mechanic experience (a good thing given the age of the truck they are using!)



Shelling corn with the new Cooperative machinery.

We will be watching the revival of the Cooperative, which has been inactive for most of the past 20 years, with interest. They are already talking about what projects they will undertake next, and our hope is that part of their vision will include employment of the three Valle Nuevo university students who have now completed agriculture degrees. WHRI hopes to serve as a resource as they develop strategic plans and undertake future projects.

ADES/Santa Marta projects

We were once again warmly received by both the ADES leadership and the youth leaders loosely allied with ADES who run the Santa Marta greenhouses. They clearly look to WHRI as a source for technical support and planning advice, particularly related to organic vegetable production. At their request we delivered and trained them to use a pH and conductivity meter for testing compost, provided vegetable seed, and attended a training session they conducted for local farmers in the Santa Marta community center.

The three university agriculture graduates we began working with last year have decided to part ways with the greenhouse youth, citing a difference in vision. They feel the greenhouse project serves more as a social center for local youth than as a viable business. As a consequence, it doesn't generate enough income to compensate those who wish to farm for a living. Without significant grant income, they would likely not survive as currently organized. We plan to work with the greenhouse youth leadership to think through these issues and work toward a more sustainable business model.

ADES itself has recently undergone a major down-sizing including laying off all their agronomy staff. Although we aren't privy to the details of this reorganization, or its long-term implications, it apparently includes abandonment of a very large Japanese government funded project whose plan included major expansion of organic vegetable production in Santa Marta. Because we had been asked to participate in this expansion, its demise will significantly affect WHRI's activities in the community.

Vegetable production & other opportunities for income generation

The Santa Marta greenhouse youth continue to impress us with their efforts at developing organic vegetable production techniques. One greenhouse is now dedicated to organic production, and boasts healthy, vigorous plantings of cucumbers (dramatically more productive than their hydroponic counterparts), tomato, carrots, cilantro, turnips, Chinese cabbage, cauliflower, green beans, and cut flowers. Last year's successful trial of organic production *outside* the greenhouses was dependent on the labor and leadership of the three ag graduates, and thus it is not clear whether it will be repeated again this year.



Organic vegetables growing in the Santa Marta greenhouse.

Within the Valle Nuevo community, interest in vegetable production remains modest, due in part to a limited supply of irrigation water for dry-season production. *Directiva* members expressed interest in home gardens, seeing them as a way to produce some of the vegetables they are accustomed to purchasing from Honduran and Guatemalan farmers. The most promising efforts are being undertaken by the family of ag university graduate Daisy Ayala, whose mother, Mirtala, accompanied Neil on a trip to a vegetable-producing community near La Palma two years ago. While WHRI will continue to support these and other vegetable production initiatives in the community, it seems evident that we need to begin

thinking of other opportunities for income generation from agriculture in Valle Nuevo. If the youth involved in the Cooperative succeed in forming a cohesive, viable group, we hope to work with them to discuss and set priorities for other agricultural enterprises.

Mesa Grande trip (Neil only)

I had the unexpected opportunity to join a delegation of several hundred Santa Marta residents on a two-day visit to Mesa Grande, the site of the former refugee camps in Honduras where the community spent most of the 1980s. I heard many accounts of hardship and suffering, including stories of 19 days without food on the trek to the camps, members shot trying to cross the perimeter fences, and babies borne in the midst of cholera outbreaks.

Nonetheless, I was moved by the lack of resentment and anger in the telling of these stories. Much of the delegation was young people born in the camps, and as their elders described their past, it felt more like a celebration of successful deliverance than a commemoration of suffering. This community, formed in the refugee camps of Mesa Grande, has clearly moved on to adopt a new identity.

When our conversations moved back to the years before the war when their forefathers and mothers were tenant farmers on the haciendas of large land owners in the Santa Marta area, I realized at last the full significance of them purchasing the land to which they returned. For the first time in their remembered history, the residents of Santa Marta/Valle Nuevo *own* the land on which they live, and farm, and thrive. Suffering and anger have given way to pride and gratitude. I felt the energy that kept them dancing under the star-lit night until dawn. And I understood what an honor it is to share in this journey.



Santa Marta youth hear stories of Mesa Grande sitting on the foundation of an old warehouse