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## Nicaragua's literacy campaign

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# The Sandinista Literacy Campaign in Nicaragua 1980

## 1. Introduction

The National Literacy Crusade that took place in Nicaragua from March to August 1980 was probably the biggest venture of the Sandinista rule (1979-1990) and without a doubt the most important event within the reform of the education system. Further to the achievement of reducing the overall illiteracy rate from 50.3% to 12.9% within only five months, it signified a break with fundamental elements of the previous education system and was at the same time a laboratory conducive to alternative educational designs. It produced a lasting impact on a whole generation of young people at that time but it also was and continues to be a controversial undertaking. Even two decades later many people commemorate their participation in the campaign as a “heroic deed” that marked their lives (Rocha, J.L., 2000; Nicaragua News Service, 2004), whereas the ruling Liberals and other opponent groups accuse the Sandinistas of using the campaign as a tool for “political indoctrination” (Arnove, R.F., 1994:45) and prefer to obliterate this event from the memories of the education history.

Being a building block of the political program of the Sandinista Revolution, the campaign cannot be perceived without its very particular historical, political and social context. In *pre-revolutionary Nicaragua* a comprehensive conception of adult literacy and education practically did not exist. A “complete neglect” of this field was typical for the Somoza-dictatorship which governed during more than four decades (Tünnermann, C., 1980:30). For Somocism, literacy for the majority of the population was “unnecessary, inappropriate and impossible” (Armas, L., 1981:86). Somocism was not interested in promoting massive literacy for political reasons. Literacy would have empowered people for democratic participation. Economical reasons did not play a major role, thus the exploitation model of the Somoza dynasty was based on uneducated agricultural workers.

## 2. Reasons for and goals for the campaign

The experience of the fight against the dictatorship and finally its overthrow by an organized uprising of a broad opposition movement in July 1979 strengthened the readiness and ability of the Nicaraguan population *to mobilise for their right to education*. In addition, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) had committed themselves in their historical programme (1969), and in their government programme ten years later to a massive campaign to immediately eradicate illiteracy. A decree was issued declaring 1980 the “Year of Literacy”. The new government leaders saw literacy as an integral part of national development. However, two main *reasons* motivated the Sandinistas to put literacy at the centre of their incipient revolutionary project: firstly, justice and a moral obligation of the revolution towards the population; and secondly, literacy was seen as a part of the preparation of the whole population to manage the big task of national reconstruction (Arrien, J.B./ Matus L., R. 1989:94). Their literacy campaign emerged out of the context of the war of liberation, which had strengthened the leaders’ faith in people’s capacity to learn and respond to difficult challenges.

In fact, the Sandinista government decided to *start* the literacy campaign only eight months after their victory in order to use the broad social consensus, that was still existing at that moment, for mass mobilisation for the right to education. The Sandinistas were in a hurry to lead the broad but diffuse support of the population into solid forms of organization and to initiate awareness raising processes in the face of the expected increasing attacks from the

opposition. Further developments confirmed the correctness of using the momentum and commitment of popular mobilisation for a national literacy campaign.

The *goals* of the literacy campaign were of a social-political, strategic and educational nature: (a) to eradicate illiteracy; (b) to encourage an integration and understanding between Nicaraguans of different classes and backgrounds; (c) to increase political awareness; (d) to nurture attitudes and skills related to creativity, production, co-operation, discipline and analytical thinking; (e) to support national cohesion and consensus; (f) and to strengthen the channels for economic and political participation (Cardenal, F./ Miller, V., 1982:205).

### **3. Preparation of the campaign**

Father Fernando Cardenal was appointed as the national coordinator of the literacy campaign and *preparations* started immediately in August 1979. The responsible core team investigated previous literacy efforts in Nicaragua and studied other countries' experiences, mainly those of Brazil, Colombia, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome, Principe, Cabo Verde, Mozambique, Peru and Cuba. The latter certainly had the greatest influence on the Nicaraguan campaign (Black, G./Bevan, J., 1980:44). In October 1979 the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire was invited to advise on the literacy campaign. Important elements of his pedagogical and methodological approach were taken up and adapted to the specific circumstances in Nicaragua (Interview with Tünnermann, C., 10.12.1992; Craven, D., 1990:102). The literacy campaign was also marked by the "Principal Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean" which was promoted by UNESCO and adopted at the end of 1979 by the Regional Conference of the Latin American Education and Planning Ministers in Mexico.

Also in October 1979, a *national census* of all Nicaraguans over ten years of age was undertaken to determine the level of illiteracy, the precise location of the illiterates, and the availability of volunteers to teach and of teaching locations. The census was not just a gathering of data but a miniature campaign in itself, because it helped inform people about the upcoming literacy campaign, overcome cultural barriers between urban and rural areas, and develop first relationships of mutual commitment. The entire exercise was inexpensively done by volunteers in a record time of two weeks. "This direct mobilisation of Nicaraguans underpins every stage of the Literacy Crusade" (Black, G./Bevan, J., 1980:50). After a short, intensive training period, the volunteer census takers were sent throughout the country. Each province had a census coordinator who worked in conjunction with a special support commission made up of government institutions, citizen's associations, labour organizations, and church and student groups. Together they oversaw the organization, management and training of the census brigades, which were composed of students, parents, teachers, labour union and citizens' association members, army personnel and peasants.

The brigades were provided with survey forms, an instruction manual, a list of the approximate population in a given municipality, and when available, a census map. The census was carried out on a minimal budget. Provincial offices were in charge of raising their own funds. All surveyors, who usually conducted their census taking in pairs, were given a letter of identification which helped them to get free transportation. Transportation was difficult, and remote areas were not completely covered. But most problems revolved around the poverty and misery encountered by the brigades in the countryside. Many census volunteers became ill, and almost all registered shock at the dreadful health and nutrition conditions of the rural population (Miller, V., 1985:54-58).

Since the few existing computers in the country were engaged in economic tasks, the decision was made to process the data by hand. About 2,500 especially trained volunteer tabulators completed the task in less than ten days. According to the results of this census, 50.35% (722,431) of the population was illiterate: 51.5% of these were male and 49.28% female; 28.4% of them were living in urban areas and 75.44% in rural areas. It was striking that the 10-14 year group alone amounted 21% of the entire target group of illiterates, which shows the Somocist school system in a negative light. Also, regional differences mirrored the unequal development in the country: In the industrially more developed Pacific region the illiteracy rate was 39.5%, in the central mountain region 66.7% and in the less developed Atlantic region 71.6%. According to the census findings, for every three illiterates one literate person was available to teach. This average implied, of course, a surplus of available volunteers in the cities and a deficit in the countryside.

#### **4. Governance of the campaign**

In pursuit of the goal to strengthen *stakeholder involvement and ownership*, the Ministry of Education appointed delegates of 25 different civil organizations, unions, media, church, ministries, universities and other institutions to set up the National Literacy Commission, which was presided over by the Minister and which as the “supreme authority”, should decide upon the political guidelines of the campaign. Parallel commissions were established on both the departmental and municipal levels, which served essentially as a resource for mobilization and co-ordination channels. Sub-commissions were accordingly formed at the local level. This decentralization of responsibilities intended to promote direct participation of the population.

The *organization and management* of the campaign consisted of a single national co-ordination structure, the National Coordination Board, which in turn was made up of seven divisions: Technical/Pedagogical, Production and Design, Technical/Organizational, Public Relations, Financial Promotion, Administrative, and Communication. Each division was again structured into sections. This executive structure was repeated at departmental and municipal level along similar lines – Technical/Pedagogical, Statistics and Census, Logistical Support and Publicity. A network of some forty-seven short-wave radios was established to enable constant and direct communication between the different components of this structure.

The campaign created a large and far-reaching organizational network in the country, one that extended to the most remote areas, in order to decentralize responsibilities. Maintaining dynamic organizational support for the network was important to the further building of the Sandinista development programme. According to Valerie Miller, the fact that the campaign was incorporated under the organizational umbrella of the Ministry of Education was detrimental to this process and also caused a lot of organizational problems when it came to the implementation of the campaign. This *institutional integration* was decided to provide more efficient access to ministry resources and structures, but it was “often unnecessarily cumbersome, conflictual, and a potential obstacle to future innovative programming in adult education” (Miller, V., 1985:226). Many problems resulting from “double bureaucracy” and overlapping responsibilities could have been avoided by choosing to organize the campaign as an autonomous venture. “If the organizational arrangement had guaranteed a direct application of lessons learned in the campaign to the formal education system, the bureaucratic difficulties might have been worthwhile, but it did not” (ibid.:227). Afterwards it was difficult for the follow-up adult education programme to maintain the special character, creativity, and flexibility to respond to problems when the decision was made to incorporate it also under the control of the Ministry, with its child-centred focus and large bureaucracy. The

campaign's internal organizational structure became more complex over time and was highly responsive to changing operational demands. However, its expansion and the lack of integration between the Pedagogical Division and the rest of the organizational structure sometimes created inconsistencies during the campaign and affected the continuity of the following adult education programme (ibid.: 229).

In consideration of the different conditions in rural and urban areas, and of the time that each of the volunteers had available, two kinds of *literacy contingents* were organized: those who had only time for a couple of hours a day – workers, government employees, housewives and all those who could not leave the urban areas for several months, - to teach literacy in urban neighbourhoods, organized as Citizens' Literacy Promoters (*Alfabetizadores Populares-AP*); and those who were able to devote themselves full-time to the literacy work organized in the Popular (or Citizen's) Literacy Army (*Ejército Popular de Alfabetización - EPA*). 55% of the young volunteers, known as *brigadistas*, were secondary and university students as well as teachers, who went for five months to the mountain and rural areas. Besides teaching literacy, these young people also shared the life and work of peasant families in their homes and fields. Volunteer health brigades from medical schools who provided *brigadistas* with basic medical services, and cultural brigades from universities who travelled throughout the country recording folktales, histories, music and customs of the rural people, were also incorporated into the EPA. Literacy at the workplace was organized by the labour unions as the Workers' Militia of Literacy Promoters. The Nicaraguan Educators' Association ANDEN organized the technical support staff for the entire campaign.

The *recruitment of volunteers*, particularly for the rural areas, was not as problem free as the census data suggested. One month before the campaign was to start, many parents still had not given their permission for their younger children to participate (minimum age was 12). In the face of this predominantly middle-class opposition, which was based on a mixture of political hostility, misunderstanding, snobbery and parental anxieties (Black, G./ Bevan, J., 1980:53), a massive campaign to convince parents took place through the media and youth organizations. 68% of secondary students participated in the literacy programme in the rural areas. Also, while the most positive response came from working-class families, the mobilisation of school teachers proved to be difficult as well. About half of the then employed teachers did not participate in the literacy campaign faking sickness and other excuses in order to stay in the urban areas (Castilla Urbina, M. de, 1981:44). Many school teachers were afraid of losing their status and of facing new kinds of horizontal relationships with their students. A second recruiting campaign had to be carried out after the beginning of the literacy campaign directed at secondary and university students who had not previously responded, because there was still a lack of *brigadistas*. In the end only 35.7% % of the 266,501 persons who said in the census that they wanted to teach, actually volunteered in the campaign.

The *management style* of the campaign, which was in large part adapted from the particular experience of the liberation war, allowed for "unusual flexibility, responsiveness and participation". It was not based on precise long-term planning. The high degree of responsiveness with which the process and its participants functioned, and with which the staff was able to react to problems quickly and quite effectively, was one of the strengths of this management model. This "unique Nicaraguan" approach proved efficient in most circumstances because the staff had close ties with the people who were carrying out the programme and were also acquainted with the day-to-day operational problems those people faced. Up-to-date feedback was constantly solicited and an attitude of questioning and problem solving predominated. In this sense the campaign itself was a national process of learning and growth (Miller, V., 1985:209). The educational design process involved learning

from experience. Problems and achievements were not defined in the traditional way as successes and failures but as continuing challenges.

The *costs* for the campaign were estimated at 20 million US dollars. They were mainly covered by private and international donations. Beginning in October 1979 a national publicity campaign began in order to raise funds. In the end the real costs of the campaign, only 12 million US dollars, were much lower than expected beforehand (Armas, L, 1981:91). According to that figure the cost of getting one person literate was around 30 dollars. Since the campaign was based on the principle of promoting voluntary participation of the teaching and support staff, costs could be kept low. During the five month period of the campaign implementation schools and universities were closed down so that students and their teachers, who received their normal monthly salary from the Ministry of Education, could participate. In addition it is estimated that the voluntary literacy teachers, who lived and worked together with the peasants in the rural areas, produced more than 10 million working hours during the campaign (Lacayo, F., 1983:197).

## **5. Curriculum and training**

The *curriculum and the methodology* were tested in a pilot project which provided some “valuable insights”, but mainly due to time constraints the effort was not fully effective. In addition, untested changes in the sequence of the curriculum presented linguistic difficulties for many learners during the campaign. From a pedagogical perspective the campaign used a combination of methods and techniques in order to stimulate learner participation, initiative and creativity, these included experiential learning, dialogue, group discussions and collective problem solving. The methods emerged from an intense, creative process of discussion that continued throughout the campaign, enriching and strengthening the programme (Miller, V., 1985:71). The ten-step dialogue method that was used with the primer was not only a process to learn to read and to write but also an attempt to engage learners actively in discussions of issues of community and national concern and to encourage collective action in response to these shared problems. This educational approach tried to overcome the separation between theory and practice, knowledge and work, education and life (Alemán, L, et al., 1979:82), however the method was not as successful as expected.

The dialogue process turned out to be “one of the weakest areas of the method” (Miller, V., 1985:220). The guidelines did not include a step specifically designed to elicit discussion about the learners’ personal relationships to the situation being analysed. This limited the potential for dialogue and action, because the participants’ sense of identification with the problem under discussion and feelings of responsibility for its solution were lessened. According to Valerie Miller, given the minimal amount of training the volunteers received, and the general unfamiliarity with the approach, expectations regarding the dialogue were unreasonably high. “Instead of occurring within the context of the lessons, there was often lively dialogue and discussion outside the formal study time in the natural sharing of everyday life”. During the campaign some important elements of the literacy method, which were eliminated during the pilot phase, were reincorporated and other supportive methods were also developed (ibid.:220/221).

The most remarkable innovation in methodology was the development of a process of *community-action research* which provided a concrete means of community participation in development planning and transformation through a structured educational process and a field diary, which were used to facilitate the learning of the volunteer teachers. Their learning was considered equally important to that of the literacy students. However, time constraints and a

scarcity of resources were the main obstacles which affected the power and strength of the initial promising results of the community-action research process (Miller, V., 1985:222).

More than any other pedagogical component of the campaign the *training component* was “the most effective in putting the goals of the revolution into practice”. Within a pedagogy of shared responsibility and organized in a decentralized manner, it was participatory, responsive and creative, especially in the first two phases. In the first phase a team of 80 trainers (40 teachers and 40 students) were prepared in a two-week intensive workshop. In the second phase these 80 undertook training of 560 additional trainers, who in turn trained 7,000. In the beginning of March 1980, all schools and universities were closed down for the last massive phase, where these 7,000 trainers trained in ten-day workshops more than 100,000 literacy teachers. This multiplier model of the training process, “even though it diminished the professional quality of the workshops, allowed for the preparation of the entire national teaching force in new, more participatory methods” (Miller, V., 1985:224). A scheme of permanent training through supervision, regular Saturday workshops and a radio programme paid tribute to the fact that a two-week initial training was not enough to achieve the desired teaching quality. The Saturday workshops, an experience that was replicated later for teacher training, were used to reflect upon practice and develop pedagogical concepts for a new educational approach.

A series of *record-keeping documents and tests* were also devised to determine the progress of literacy students during the campaign. Three qualifying tests were given to the participants in different moments of the literacy programme. The initial test was designed to determine the actual skill level of each participant, beginning with a simple exercise (drawing a straight line). The next level of skill tested was the ability to write one’s name, which was followed by reading and writing exercises. The test concluded with a comprehension exercise. People who completed all sections successfully were considered literate, and those who could read and write a few words were classified as semi-literates. Illiterates included people who could not read and write more than their own name. After completing the first half of the primer, an intermediate test was given to assess a learner’s progress and diagnose individual study needs. The final test was administered by the literacy volunteer under the guidance of a technical advisor. It consisted of five parts and tested reading, writing, and comprehension skills. To be considered and statistically recorded *literate*, participants had to have worked through the literacy primer and had to be able to write their name, read aloud a short text, answer three questions based on the reading, write a sentence dictated to them, and write a short composition. Test results for each of the three tests were recorded, as were observations about individual learning difficulties, health problems, and areas of personal interest for future study (Miller, V., 1985:58/59).

## **6. Evaluation and outcomes**

The outstanding moments of *evaluating* the literacy campaign were the first Literacy Congress held in June 1980, which constituted a mid-term evaluation and preparation for the “final offensive”, and the second Literacy Congress which took place in September 1980. This second congress was not only intended to be a final evaluation of the campaign but also to systematize its experiences and make the lessons learned available for the planning of a continuous adult education programme.

The *outcomes* of the campaign were something to be proud of:

- Altogether more than one-fifth of the population participated directly in the campaign, and through family and friends almost the entire nation was affected by its efforts.
- In five months 95,582 *brigadistas* achieved in teaching 406,056 Nicaraguans to read and to write in Spanish so that the illiteracy rate of 50.35% could be reduced by 37.39 percentage points to 12.96%. In the more industrialized Pacific region the illiteracy rate was reduced from 28.06 to 7.8%, in the central mountain region from 66.74% to 20.21%, and in the least developed Atlantic region the leap was biggest with 78.07% to 25.59% (Encuentro No.16, 1980:28; Hanemann, U., 2001, Annexes).
- In addition, in a following campaign in the Atlantic region from October 1980 to March 1981 12,664 more people would become literate in the local languages Miskitu, Sumo and Creole English (ibid.:53).
- One of the most important results of the campaign was the interaction between urban and rural populations. Living together with the rural population had a deep impact on young people and allowed them to gain new insights into the socio-economic and cultural realities of their country. This political consciousness affected the development of an entire generation.
- It brought tangible evidence to the most marginalized groups of Nicaraguans that the society was going to include them and the revolutionary movement change their lives for the better (Carnoy, M./Torres, C.A., 1990:337). The campaign was designed as part of a social transformation process aiming at the redistribution of power and wealth. The campaign helped people to develop basic skills, knowledge and attitudes conducive to this transformation.
- For many women the literacy campaign signified an opportunity for emancipation: 60% of the *brigadistas* were female, as were some 50% of the literacy learners. The separation of the teaching force (Popular Literacy Army) according to men and women increased the leadership opportunities for female *brigadistas* (Miller, V., 1985:200).
- A longitudinal study carried out on the effects of the campaign (Epstein, H., 1995) indicated that women who became literate as adults in 1980 now have healthier children (Daniel, P., 2002:3).
- Many of the returning young *brigadistas* decided to make a career as a teacher.
- So-called “by-products” of the campaign included infrastructural and construction work, an anti-malaria campaign, environmental, health and sanitation actions, research for the governmental Agrarian Reform Institute, collection of biological, archaeological and cultural material, the political mandate to help build unions and popular organizations and countless local development projects. All these activities were carried out or promoted by the *brigadistas*.
- Through their participation in the campaign the popular and labour organizations expanded their networks of affiliates and strengthened their operational capacities.
- As part of a national development programme the campaign was able to mobilize necessary resources, but more important “it was able to challenge people to excellence” (Miller, V., 1985:201), which means that a general climate of creativity and cooperation and the multiple difficulties that the participants had to overcome drove them to excel themselves.
- The literacy campaign contributed to the genesis of the Sandinista education project and a new political culture.
- Nicaragua made a substantial contribution to the world’s experience in finding solutions to eradicate illiteracy.

Robert F. Arnove thinks that these statistics are excessive because firstly, from the rest of 12.96% illiterates about 130,000 persons were subtracted who had been assessed as “unteachable”, so that the remaining illiteracy rate would have been about 23%; and secondly, a longitudinal study carried out in 1991/1992 found that about a quarter to one third of those who were registered by name in the national literacy museum as literate had not participated in the campaign or dropped out early. The same study detected that about 37% of a random sample of 4,000 women who were declared as literate were not able to read or write a simple sentence Arnove, R.F., 1995b:223/224). Richard Kraft opposes to this: “Even if the numbers were exaggerated and even if a certain percentage of people slip back into illiteracy, the accomplishment is without precedent in educational history” (Kraft, R., 1983:93). The fact that 56,2% of the 722,431 Nicaraguans, who were registered in the census as illiterate, became literate within only five months is indeed a remarkable achievement.

## 7. Difficulties, criticism and lessons learned

The campaign was also confronted with a number of *difficulties and criticism*. Since a lot of volunteers were needed, recruitment practices could become tough: “Peer pressure to join was strong and the Ministry of Education promised to give preferential treatment in the future to *ex-brigadistas* in such matters as scholarships” (Flora, J.L./ McFadden, J./ Warner, R., 1983:54). Due to the remoteness and isolation of many literacy class locations there were lots of logistical problems. 59 *brigadistas* died in accidents or were victims by counter-revolutionary forces. Reports from volunteers and technical advisors indicated widespread learning difficulties and cases of disability. In all, about nine percent of the population was found to have severe learning disabilities that prevented their acquiring basic literacy skills (Miller, V., 1995:60). Teachers felt hurt in their professional honour when asked to subordinate to the political leadership of often younger people. Opposition started to form, in particular against the political intention of the campaign. One of the reasons behind the criticism that the whole campaign served the political interests and goals of the Sandinistas could have been the concern that an increased participation of the population might change the power relationships within the society. Very often Paulo Freire was quoted in this context: “This type of National Literacy Crusade is not a pedagogical program with political implications, but rather, it is a political project with pedagogical implications” (quoted in: Miller, V., 1985:25).

Though literacy was closely linked to women’s involvement in social action for development it did not address their strategic gender needs and interests: *Women* continued to be marginalized in decision-making at higher levels (Daniel, P., 2002:4). The fact that *young people*, most of them secondary school students, had to teach adults of all age groups signified a break with the traditional image of a teacher and often led to resistance. But in general, when people became aware that the *brigadistas* were properly prepared for teaching, they accepted to be taught by children and youngsters, who in turn learned to perform new tasks in their host family’s working day. The Sandinista leadership put great trust on the youngsters capabilities to deal with the challenges of the literacy campaign after the experience of the final insurrection against the dictatorship, which had been supported mainly by the *muchachos* (boys and girls).

The major *obstacles* that affected the literacy campaign were related to problems and deficiencies inherited from the past. Few people in Nicaragua had any background or experience in literacy, adult education or participatory learning methods. The country’s teaching force was conservative, both pedagogically and politically (Miller, V., 1985:215). One of the weakest points of the literacy campaign was the lack of preparation for a smooth

transition to the post-literacy programme. Nicaragua's planners were under no illusions that a five month campaign would solve the country's literacy problem (Black, G./ Bevan, J, 1980:68). Although the post-literacy program was initiated immediately after the campaign, the transition period to the Adult Basic Popular Education programme was affected by the withdrawal of the *brigadistas* who had to return to their studies and work in the cities. The main players now – volunteer teachers living in the rural areas, who were hardly a step ahead of their learners, and the newly literates – were not sufficiently prepared for this transition and organizational structures were too weak to guarantee continuity and sustainability of the learning processes started with the massive campaign.

In September 1980 UNESCO awarded the government and population of Nicaragua the “Nadezhda K. Krupskaya” prize for their successful literacy campaign. The General Director of UNESCO at that time, Amadou M. M'Bow called the literacy campaign an “exiting experiment from both an ethical and pedagogical perspective” (Miller, V., 1985:13). The overall success of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign was a result of “a very unique set of circumstances” (ibid., 233). Although these circumstances could not be replicated easily in other countries, valuable *lessons* can be learned from this experience:

- The Nicaraguan experience shows the power of political commitment. It is necessary for the governors to have a political will which is coherent and in line with social development.
- In countries with few financial resources and with a poorly developed economy and infrastructure like Nicaragua, a massive literacy campaign mainly based on volunteers, trade unions and mass organizations, is able to make a difference.
- It is necessary to develop a flexible approach to planning, management and administration of a literacy programme, that is capable in responding to the exigencies and unforeseen situations that may arise, since even with previous experience it is impossible to plan for all the contingencies which a task of such great scope demands.
- The mobilization, training and participation of volunteers cannot be successful without the professional guidance of a technical and organized leadership. It is necessary to have a clear and differentiated strategy for the mobilization of urban and rural volunteers.
- A genuine trust in the people's creativity and capacity was key in achieving effective popular organization and participation which was more important for the success than the display of technical and financial resources.
- It required courage, willingness to take risks, optimism and determination from the politicians to get involved in a dynamic which was supported by a popular movement without being able to guarantee, - mainly for reasons of time constraints,- more favourable and safeguarded technical and pedagogical conditions.
- Even the most successful intensive campaign will fail without a comprehensive follow-up scheme. Post-literacy programmes have to be planned, designed and promoted from the inception of a massive literacy programme in order to prepare and open up opportunities for all people who wish to continue learning.

Father Fernando Cardenal, in the statement “the crusade is not a story of complicated techniques or complex cost-benefit analysis; It is a story of people and the extraordinary potential for liberation and creation that exists within nations” (in: Miller, V., 1985:204), emphasizes the possibility of replicating this experience in other countries and historical moments. Within this specific context and during its limited period of time the Nicaraguan literacy campaign *successfully* gave an important impetus to peoples' and country's

development. And again, within the context of the subsequent war and economical crisis, the continuity and sustainability of this movement *failed*.

## **8. Results of the Sandinista literacy policy during the eighties and the national literacy policy after 1990.**

From the very inception of the literacy campaign, Nicaraguan educational planners saw it as a short, intense national campaign. It was limited to a five months period in acknowledgement of the impossibility to maintain this kind of major mobilization of the population for a longer term. Learning in massive campaigns – be it in the area of education, health or defence, - was seen by the Sandinista government as political education and as part of the democratic process (Arrien, J.B., 1983:85-87). From 1980 to 1989, 330,873 persons became literate through the Adult Basic Popular Education programme, which represents 81.5% of those who became literate during the 1980 campaign. Altogether 1,600,631 adults studied in the different modalities of this programme from 1980-1989.

During the first four years of the Sandinista government, until 1983, the provision of educational services had experienced an extraordinary expansion (78.9%) which then slowed down in the following years due to the impact stemming from the beginning of the contra-revolutionary war. From a peak of 187,858 students enrolled in literacy classes in 1983, enrolment had decreased to 83,797 in 1988 and further to 16,363 in 1990 (Arrien, J.B./ Matus L., R., 1989:30; Arrove, R.F., 1994:224). The education system could not keep up with a population growth of 3.3%, and in 1989 about 150.000 school age children did not go to school. In addition, the system could not reduce the historical levels of 15% repetition rate and 20% school drop-out rate. Towards the end of the Sandinista rule the illiteracy rate was estimated to have again increased from 12.9% to 20% (MED, 1989:3-8), according to other sources it raised again to almost 40% (Arrove, R.F., 1994:222). For many the impact of the campaign was minimal and temporary (Lankshear, C., *ibid.*).

When in 1990 the Chamorro government began to rule, literacy and adult education were further reduced to a marginalized role within the education system. The shrinking role of the state in literacy provisions was accompanied by an increased engagement of civil society organizations and international donors in adult literacy. Many of the Sandinistas who had been responsible for the previous literacy policy established NGOs after the electoral defeat of the FSLN in 1990 and started to apply the lessons learned to their new adult literacy projects. But they have not made any further impact on the national literacy policy since then.

In the 1998 UNDP Human Development Report Nicaragua was amongst those countries with a literacy rate below 70% and which made the smallest progress during the past 25 years in the field of literacy and adult education. The increase of only 15% in Nicaragua's literacy rate within this period (from 57% in 1970 to 66% in 1995) (UNDP, 1998:23) illustrated a deeply distressing picture, particularly after the successful literacy campaign of 1980. The new authorities within the Ministry of Education proceeded forcefully with dismantling the institutional memory and prevented following generations from the possibility of learning from previous experiences. No work has yet been done on the long-term repercussions of the literacy campaigns, particularly with respect to their effectiveness as agents of permanent social transformation. However, the generation involved in the 1980 literacy campaign had experiences that are still having a perceptible impact on their every day lives. They have developed a potential for taking social action for future change.

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