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Feeding Farmers and Fighting Conflict

Food insecurity and armed conflict threaten the lives of many who call the North Caribbean Coast Region (RACCN) of Nicaragua their home. Zorayda Gutierrez and her family, who live in this region, have experienced these challenges firsthand. Like many of her neighbors, she grows rice and beans on the lands of her Miskito ancestors. However, with recent armed conflict and poor crop yields the food security of families in the RACCN, like Gutierrez's, is at risk.

The RACCN is inhabited by the Miskito people and other indigenous groups who heavily rely on "slash-and-burn" farming to cultivate their crops. These farmers cut down and burn natural vegetation in order to clear land for planting. When a specific piece of land can no longer produce crops, the farmers move to a new plot of land and do the same again. This method of farming rapidly depletes the soil's nutrients and forces farmers to move further and further into virgin forest every few years.

In other regions of Nicaragua, farmers have experienced crop failure due to widespread drought. As a result, many have fled into indigenous territories in search of more fertile land. This has increased tension between the indigenous people and the new settlers.



Zorayda Gutierrez

In September 2015, armed conflict and violence erupted between these groups, leaving at least nine people dead. In the wake of this violence, an estimated 30 percent of Miskito people have fled their ancestral lands in Nicaragua, finding refuge across the border in Honduras.

For those who have remained in the RACCN, safety is an enduring challenge. Many farmers fear for their lives and are afraid to go out to their fields. This fear has clearly affected the food security of many communities, as crops suffer with minimal maintenance.

This conflict over land ownership has exacerbated the already existing climate change problems of excessive rains and even major hurricanes, proving these traditional farming techniques unsustainable for these conditions, and leading to significant food insecurity. Families are re-



Agriculture promoters like Sergio (purple shirt) work with farmers in Nicaragua to teach them about improved agricultural techniques.

porting that they expect to be without sufficient food for up to six months of the year. Already many young children are showing signs of malnutrition.

World Renew is responding by using funds from its Canadian Foodgrains Bank account and working in partnership with Acción Médica Cristiana (AMC) to bring long-term change in the region.

This starts with training local farmers to produce high quality crops each year while farming on the same land. World Renew and AMC are teaching men and women about the prevention of crop pests, how to reduce weeds, the use of natural fertilizers, and how to apply other conservation agriculture techniques. As a result, 445 farmers have improved their soil quality, reduced insect infestations, increased vegetable production, and developed better storage techniques.

This training has also had a side benefit. As land fertility increases, farmers are able to practice crop rotation, which has helped to reduce tensions over land rights with new arrivals:

"I have learned the benefits of taking better care of our crops and the advantages of living close to where we farm, working the same piece of land year after year," Zorayda Gutierrez explained. She also expressed her gratitude to World Renew and AMC for this program and has committed to sharing her knowledge.