

Family farms: A struggle for land and dignity in Honduras

by [Ben Jacques](#) in the [May 9, 2001](#) issue

We sit on makeshift stools in the shade of a large yuyuga tree beside the workhouse, a typical farm structure with bamboo and mud walls and a tin roof. A few steps away in the stables, calves wait for their feeding. On the slope below, several dozen goats graze on the hillside. Further down, toward the Ulua River that winds north through the rugged Honduran mountains, children take sheep to pasture.

The men who sit with me are fathers and grandfathers, campesino leaders of the CAPTAL collective farm in the town of Concepción del Norte. One has just arrived on horseback. Another has come up from the fields, placing his machete on the ground beside him. Nearby a grandson scoots up the trunk of a tree for a better view.

After *saludos* and *bienvenidos*—handshakes and welcomes—Hernán Rene Ríos, the collective's leader, begins to tell the story of the CAPTAL campesino families. Translating for me is my guide, Tim Wheeler, a Presbyterian Church missionary assigned to work with the Christian Commission for Development (CCD) and Heifer Project International (HPI). In a country marked by abject poverty Tim and his wife, Gloria, provide coordination and support to a wide range of projects that enable poor families to achieve self-reliance, health and dignity.

Thanking God for our visit, Don Hernán begins with the good news. Although the farmers lost their corn and bean crops to Hurricane Mitch in 1998, no animals were lost. In fact, 23 calves have been born this year. The cattle, a mix of hardy, cream-colored Brahmin and Brown Swiss, are giving good milk, as are the dairy goats, black-and-white alpins and floppy-eared nubians. Last month the animals gave 5,546 bottles of milk. This means that there is plenty for everyone in the collective and extra to sell or process into cheese.

"We have completely done away with malnutrition," Don Hernán says. And to make his point, he gestures to a boy and girl sitting on the barn stoop. "See how fat they are!" The children grin shyly. Which do they prefer, cow's milk or goat's? "Goat's

milk,” the boy responds. “Many families prefer goat’s milk because it is so nutritious,” Hernán states.

After the hurricane the collective had to rely on its animals. Those designated for meat were slaughtered and shared with all the families. And the cooperative continued to sell young animals to fund farm repairs, improvements, medicine and other necessities. They also decided to give two liters of milk a day to a widow in town whose house was washed away by El Mitch.

Although the farmers still face challenges—how to pay for seeds for the spring planting, how to obtain additional acreage to plant sugar cane, vegetables and forage crops, how to fund an irrigation system—they’ve come a long way in the past two decades. In 1980 they were desperate. They had neither land nor milk. The meager wages the men could earn as laborers on large farms did not pay for even the basic necessities. The children were malnourished and often sick.

That’s when the families decided to organize and seek land where they could grow their own crops. Honduras has plenty of fertile land, but most of it belongs to wealthy plantation owners or foreign corporations like Standard Fruit or Chiquita Brand International, which produce bananas, coffee and other export crops. Hundreds of thousands of poor campesinos are forced to live and farm on the rugged sides of mountains. To make matters worse, traditional slash-and-burn techniques and the overharvesting of trees for firewood or lumber have led to widespread soil depletion and erosion.

In search of arable land, the campesinos sought to take advantage of Honduras’ 1975 Agrarian Reform Law, which specified that landless farmers could claim unused land through a lengthy process of application and verification. Yet throughout the country campesinos making land claims were met with hostility, threats and violence. Some were arrested and jailed. A few were killed. “We were opposed by the ranchers in our own village,” Don Hernán says. “They told us we could not do it, that we could not define our own destiny.”

In 1980, staking out approximately 100 manzanas (one manzana equals 1.7 acres) of unused land on the slopes of the mountain, the Concepción del Norte families bolstered their claim by moving onto the land and refusing to leave. With the strength of numbers and the support of churchpeople and agrarian reform advocates, their claim was eventually authorized.

Since then, however, land reform laws have repeatedly been weakened or nullified. In effect, the collective has been required to purchase the land it once claimed. Twenty-one years later, CAPTAL is in the final process of gaining a legal title to it.

In 1983 the farmers applied to a new ecumenical rural development agency, the Christian Commission for Development, for loans to plant corn and beans. Now providing community development services in over 400 villages and cities throughout Honduras, CCD provided the collective not only with money, but with training in organization and farming methods.

In 1984 CAPTAL applied for grants for cattle through CCD's partner agency, Heifer Project International. "We started with ten cows and calves, and right away we started to get milk and distribute it to all our members." Don Hernán says.

In 1987 HPI delivered 13 goats to the collective. "At first, we distributed the goats to individual families," Don Hernán reports, "but within months eight goats died, so we decided at our meeting to care for our goats collectively." Now the goatherd numbers 60. The collective also has 26 sheep.

As in all HPI grants made to collectives and individual families, recipients contract to pass on the first female offspring to a neighbor. This practice is known around the world as "passing on the gift." A farm collective may pass on several animals as a start-up project for another collective, or donate a single heifer, doe, ewe or sow to a neighboring family.

Because farmers can never raise enough cash from beans and corn to rise above subsistence, an animal is a monumental gift for a poor family. In addition to the dramatic increase in nutrition a dairy cow or goat provides, future offspring may be sold to raise money for medicine, building supplies, education or the purchase of additional land. The animals also provide invaluable fertilizer, used to enrich and rebuild depleted soil.

This explains why campesinos throughout Honduras often made heroic efforts to save their animals during Hurricane Mitch. During the flooding that devastated the area bordering Nicaragua, members of one cooperative secured their young children in trees while the men swam with their cattle to higher ground. Nevertheless, in a disaster that took almost 6,000 lives and left hundreds of thousands homeless, farmers also lost livestock. Thanks to a sharp increase in donations from churches and individuals in North America, both the CCD and HPI have been able to expand

their work to meet both crisis and developing needs in Honduras. HPI has been able to replace all the livestock lost in the floods and open up programs in new areas. Wheeler, who has worked in Honduras for 24 years, has seen HPI grow steadily from a few small projects to partnerships with a wide array of nongovernmental organizations, extending its reach throughout the country.

For example, HPI has started a new dairy cattle project in the impoverished Bajo Aguan area, where 95 percent of the residents have no access to milk. In all its projects, livestock grants are integrated into sustainable-agriculture programs, including controlled grazing, organic fertilization, terracing, agroforestry and reforestation. Involving cattle, goats, sheep, pigs, donkeys, mules, chickens, rabbits and even fish, these projects are helping poor farmers improve both their lives and land. By rebuilding the soil and structure of hillside acreage, they are making the land more resistant to natural disasters like El Mitch.

At the center of HPI and CCD work is the empowerment of people. Noemi de Espinoza, CCD's founder and executive director, is a veteran advocate for human and economic rights for Honduras's poorest citizens. In 1999, Espinoza was presented with the Honduran Human Rights Prize, awarded to CCD for its community development work throughout the country.

"The poor majority must be at the center of our focus," she said. "We have to change the way power is distributed and exercised, so that the poor and forgotten can participate in rebuilding their lives, and not just be spectators as the international assistance is used to rebuild an economy for the wealthy."

Few communities better exemplify this philosophy than the CAPITAL collective. "We give to the collective, and it gives back to us," says Don Hernan. All decisions affecting the group's welfare are made together—what new crops to plant, how many animals to sell, how to spend cash from sales, how to meet the emergency needs of individual families. Each day three families are assigned to maintain the farm, and one day a week all the members join in. This rotation of labor allows members to supplement their income with jobs away from the farm.

But there are new concerns. The high inflationary rate is driving up the cost of medicine, building supplies and salt, which must be added to animal feed. The cooperative is considering selling up to 50 percent of its milk while reducing the size of its herds to avoid overgrazing. Its members want to plant more forage crops and

put in an irrigation system. They would like to set up a micro-credit program that would allow them to make small loans to members for individual needs. And if the 40 children from the collective now attending school wish to go beyond the sixth grade, they will need more money for education.

The success of the collective has allowed its members to break out of the cycle of poverty. It has also brought affirmation of their human and economic rights. The support of CCD and HPI “has helped us to be recognized as persons of value, of inherent self-worth,” Don Hernan says. For these families the spirit of community is at the heart of what they do each day. It has brought them, finally, to a place of dignity.