

# San Andrés, Bosawás Biosphere Reserve, Nicaragua

## Change for Children Association

[www.changeforchildren.org](http://www.changeforchildren.org)

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## San Andrés, Bosawás Biosphere Reserve, Nicaragua

Designated a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO and rich in biodiversity, the Bosawás is the largest tract of tropical rainforest outside the Amazon. This remote rainforest is home to Miskito and Mayangna, two Indigenous groups who are stewards of the land. There is a growing issue of Nicaraguan farmers encroaching and illegally clearing the forests, making it difficult for the Miskito and Mayangna to preserve the land. The life expectancy in the Bosawás is 67 years; this number is considered the longest a person can live in Bosawás.



Located along the banks of the Coco River, San Andrés is accessible only by boat and has about 1,800 inhabitants. There is a small health centre in San Andrés, but the nearest hospital is 8 hours by boat down the Coco River. Miskitu is spoken in San Andrés but the official language of Nicaragua is Spanish, which is the second language for most people in San Andrés. When the government sends materials for schools or posters about Covid-19, they are written in Spanish.

Most people in San Andrés can't afford lights at home. No one has running water in the home, and instead use water from wells or the Coco River. Most households are multi-

generational, with grandparents, parents, and children living together. It's common to see men playing in a baseball league, teenage girls playing soccer, or families attending dances at the community centre!

There is no formal employment in Bosawás. Instead, residents of San Andrés earn incomes through subsistence farming, domestic animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, small-scale mining, and panning for gold. To find formal employment, men are forced to leave the community and work in manual labour jobs.

**The Challenge:** Education in the Bosawás continues to be the poorest in the country, due to the Nicaraguan government often failing to provide school supplies, funding, and teacher training. Teachers are underpaid or not paid at all, and schools lack basic resources. While primary school education is available in San Andrés, to continue education beyond grade six, students have to leave their families to attend school in a larger town. Due to responsibilities within the family, many students do not leave to continue their studies. It is even less likely that girls continue their education due to their domestic and family responsibilities, cultural norms, and safety concerns with leaving the community.

Girls have less access to education than boys do, yet as women they later become responsible for the health, hygiene, nutrition, education and personal development of their households. As men are forced to travel to other communities for employment opportunities, women also take on roles of leadership within the community. However, having been unable to access education, these women leaders aren't as well educated as they may be.

## Glossary

Animal Husbandry: A branch of agriculture concerned with the production and care of animals.

Life Expectancy: The average age of death in a population. Life expectancies can reflect global inequalities. Higher income countries typically have high life expectancies and lower income countries have lower life expectancies.

Subsistence Farming: A system of farming that provides enough for the family, but no significant surplus for the family to sell.

## **Maria**

12 year old girl

Has two siblings, parents, and grandparents

Maria is the daughter of humble peasant Miskito farmers. Every afternoon she helps her parents in the work of their small farm growing taro (similar to yams) and yucca. Maria also helps sell some of the modest harvest within her community and on the banks of the river to boat traders traveling to the city.

Maria is keenly interested in her sixth-grade studies and pursuing secondary school next year despite her parents' reluctance to send her to a neighbouring community to attend given her considerable responsibilities at home and concerns for her safety. But Maria has big plans! Despite how impossible it seems, Maria dreams of being a doctor. While her community has a government health centre, it is frequently unattended and unmanned as doctors from other areas travel in and out of San Andrés, leaving her community vulnerable for months at a time.

## **Maya**

34 year old woman

Married

Mother of three children

As a child, Maya attended primary school and can read and write. She never attended secondary school, since she helped her father in the fields as soon as she was old enough to, and started her own family when she was just 16.

Maya washes clothes in the Coco River and makes several trips a day to and from the river to collect water for drinking, for washing, and for cooking. She doesn't work outside the home, but cares for her three children, her husband, and her ageing parents. She has a small vegetable garden and tends to chickens and a milk cow.

Maya wants her daughter to receive further education, but worries about the danger she may face in traveling to a larger community. She also relies on Maria to support the work of the family farming and the income she makes selling some of their harvest, and worries about the impact this loss of income may have on the family.

## **Profe Lorena**

25 year old woman

Married

Mother of two small children

Profe Lorena is Maria's sixth grade teacher. She is paid a small stipend for teaching, but her job is challenging. She lacks resources and teaching materials because her community is so remote. She grew up in the Bosawás and does not have a formal teaching degree.

Profe Lorena has two small children who also attend the primary school where she works. Having grown up with limited opportunities, she works passionately to include and engage boys and girls equally in her classroom. She sees immense value in continuing the education of students in the community, and encourages them to pursue secondary education, as best they can. She knows Maria is a very bright pupil, and hopes she will be able to achieve a college education one day.

## **Jorge**

40 year old man

Married

Father of three children

Although the family lives a mostly subsistence farming lifestyle, Jorge works outside the Bosawás to further provide for his family. Jorge can read and write but he did not attend school as a boy.

With limited economic opportunities in the Bosawás, he travels outside the Bosawás to work part-time as a plantation laborer. When he is away, it is often for long stretches of time, commuting by boat 8 hours along the Coco River to first reach the nearest city and then the rural area where he works. As Jorge travels for work, he relies on Maya and Maria to take care of the family in his absence. He wants Maria to be successful, but must balance the needs of the family with her desires for further education.

## **Daniel**

18 year old man

Has two siblings, parents, and grandparents

Daniel is Maria's older brother. Having been sent to live in a neighbouring community to pursue secondary education, Daniel has recently completed his studies. He now works as a boat driver to save money to attend college in the nearest city. He wants to become one of only a handful of people in the Bosawás who hold a college degree.

He was raised to respect the forest and the land and wants to return from his studies qualified to occupy a position of responsibility to make intelligent and informed decisions for the people and the forest of the Bosawás. His time in secondary school has greatly helped him already, and he is eager for other members of his community to receive higher education. Daniel knows his sister wants to pursue a career in medicine, and he is very supportive of her goal. He is aware of the risks in travelling to receive education, but since he isn't in the community on a routine basis, he isn't able to support her pursuit of further education.

## Change for Children Association

Change for Children was founded in 1976 by a small group of people in the Edmonton area who were convinced that concerned Albertans could make a positive impact in the fight against poverty and injustice, internationally and in their own communities.

The organization's mission is to build civil society capacity in the global south and Canada to promote health, human rights and create solutions to poverty through sustainable development. They implement programs in Central America, South America, and Africa. Their programs focus on education, technology in schools, access to clean water, food security, maternal and child health, and HIV prevention.

Read more: <https://change4children.org/>

## Organization Response

In response to the lack of continuing education opportunities in the Bosawás, Change for Children is working to remove barriers to education to increase enrollment for all children, boys and girls.

The organization has built 7 secondary schools in the Bosawás, and one of them is in San Andrés. By constructing secondary schools in communities, education becomes more accessible, specifically for girls who often must also balance domestic responsibilities. Campaigning for girls' education also means changing attitudes to ensure girls are treated equally by promoting gender equality in teaching practices and raising community awareness of the gender gap. Educated girls grow

up to be educated women with increased autonomy and self-esteem, increased participation in community leadership, and increased economic empowerment. Educated women are more likely to send their own children to school, creating a ripple effect of poverty reduction for future generations. Change for Children is also introducing technology, remote digital libraries, as schools don't always have educated teachers. They have even brought solar technology to schools, so schools have power.



*One of the high schools built by Change for Children.*