

Against all Odds

Youth in Postwar Societies

The Case of Nicaragua



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German Institute of Global and Area Studies
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

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wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit
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Against All Odds: Youth in Post War Societies

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Martin Ostermeier

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Against all Odds - Youth in Postwar Societies

Postwar societies are high-risk contexts for the youth due to inequality, demographic pressure, dysfunctional institutions and the personal experience of violence. In these contexts, transitions to adulthood, i.e. economic independence, family formation, political citizenship, are difficult. While the awareness that young people are an important actor has risen considerably at the international level, young people's problems and needs are rarely priorities at the national and local level in developing societies. Youths enter the public sphere mostly when their behaviour is considered inappropriate, unsocial or violent, leading to claims about 'youth out of control'. Youths – most of all marginalized males – are considered a security threat as they account for the majority of perpetrators (and victims) of different forms of violence. Nevertheless, the vast majority of youth does not resort to arms or violence.

The case studies on El Salvador, Nicaragua, and South Africa show how formal possibilities of economic and political participation shape young people's transitions into adulthood. All three countries have a violent history but have also experienced a significant increase in the level of political participation during the last two decades. Former rebels have been elected president. The current youth cohort is the first postwar generation. Levels of postwar violence vary. El Salvador is one of the most violent countries in the world, Nicaragua has relative lower levels and South Africa presents decreasing levels of violence. While these different contexts shape young people's opportunities, a lot of similarities can be observed in these countries.

The country reports present the results of field research in early 2015. Focus group discussions with young people on their possibilities to participate were held in rural and urban contexts, in hotspots of violence and non-violent neighbourhoods. The reports show that most of the young people try to transit into adulthood by using the few possibilities provided by adult society. Major problems in all countries are related to the lack of decent work despite the fact that youth have a better education than their parents. Regarding political participation, young people express frustration that their specific needs and ideas are largely ignored by adults in government and society. This generational bottleneck contains a high potential for future conflict.

Sabine Kurtenbach

Hamburg, April 2016

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| | |
|------|---|
| ACA* | <i>Academia</i> |
| ACT* | <i>Activist</i> |
| BLC | <i>Youth living in the community “El Canal” in Bluefields</i> |
| BLU | <i>Youth studying at the Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University</i> |
| BMZ | <i>Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development</i> |
| CHU* | <i>Church representative</i> |
| CSO* | <i>Civil Society Organisation</i> |
| ECH | <i>Encuesta Continua de Hogares</i> |
| FGD | <i>Focus Group Discussions</i> |
| FSLN | <i>Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional</i> |
| JOU* | <i>Journalist</i> |
| LED | <i>Youth having received a leadership training</i> |
| MRS | <i>Movimiento Renovador Sandinista</i> |
| PLC | <i>Partido Liberal Constitucionalista</i> |
| PLI | <i>Partido Liberal Independiente</i> |
| POL* | <i>Politician</i> |
| RHC | <i>Rural High Crime</i> |
| RLC | <i>Rural Low Crime</i> |
| SIND | <i>Trade union (young leader)</i> |
| UHC | <i>Urban High Crime</i> |
| ULC | <i>Urban Low Crime</i> |
| UNDP | <i>United Nations Development Programme</i> |

Note: Acronyms marked with an asterisk (*) indicate multiple interview partners which are numbered accordingly.

Introduction



Nicaragua, the land of lakes and volcanoes; but also of the youth. In 2015, the total population was estimated at 6.2 million people, of whom 61 per cent was below the age of 30 years and about half of them are considered the youth aged: 15 to 29 years. The gender distribution is balanced and the majority (62 per cent) of young people live in urban areas (CELADE 2015a). This demographic dividend bears great potential for economic gains if the economy succeeds to properly integrate its young citizens. Apart from basic conditions like health and nutrition, political and economic participation are key elements for achieving these economic gains. However, Nicaragua's youth bulge was constantly decreasing over the past years; since the year 2000 by almost 10 percentage points (CELADE 2015a).

Nicaragua's history is characterised by several armed conflicts. Subsumed under the term *Nicaraguan Revolution*, it encom-

passes the Somoza dictatorship (1960-1970), the overthrow of the dictatorship in the late 1970s and the most bloody conflict between 1981 and 1990 which took the lives of tens of thousands Nicaraguans. With the signature of a peace agreement and elections in 1990 today's youth comprises the first post-war generation.

The political party landscape of Nicaragua comprises of about four main parties of which the first three are represented in the national parliament: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI) and Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS). In the last general elections held in 2011, the FSLN won by majority and its candidate was elected president; José Daniel Ortega Saavedra. Even though the elections were considered as free and fair, the election observation mission by the European Union highly questioned the objectivity of the national Supreme Electoral

Council and complained about the “deterioration in the transparency of the process” (European Union 2011, 5).

This report summarises the results for Nicaragua of the research project “Against all Odds – Youth in Postwar Societies”, a collaborative research project funded by the federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) between 2013 and 2015. The aim of this research project is to identify and analyze the possibilities and the limits young people face in their transition to adulthood in postwar societies. During the first phase data on a set of 21 postwar societies was gathered focusing on the risk factors for young people’s participation in different manifestations of violence as well as variables shaping youth transitions, i.e. formal education, labor market, political system. The comparative analysis of these data led to the conclusion that opportunities of political and economic participation provided to the youth might mitigate their propensity to participate in violence. In the second phase, this data analysis was complemented by three case studies (El Salvador, South Africa, Nicaragua) to shed light on the

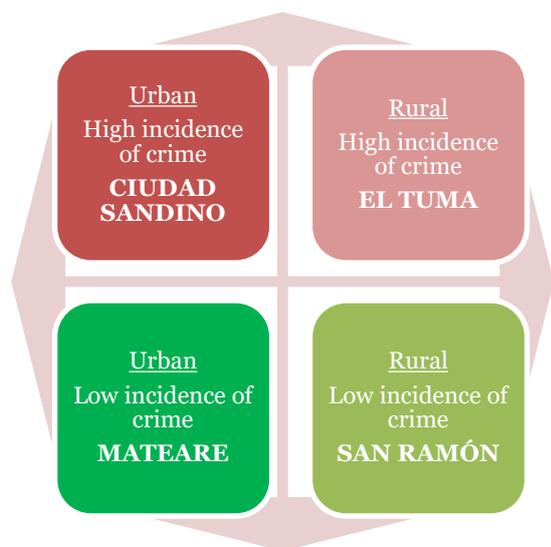
opportunities of participation and to identify the specific ways young people cope with blocked transitions. The following report reflects the case of Nicaragua. For the investigation, ten Focus Group Discussions (FGD) have been conducted and a large variety of key-actors from politics and civil society have been interviewed. At the explicit request of several FGD participants as well as of experts, all names and organisations have been made anonymous.

The report is structured as follows. After a short description of the focus groups the level of violence in Nicaragua is assessed. The second chapter addresses the opportunities and challenges young people are facing in the transition to adulthood. Particular attention is given to the opportunities for formal economic and political participation. The chapter ends with a summary of obstacles in the transition to adulthood. Chapter three describes how young people navigate through these obstacles and what options they encounter. Chapter four concludes.

Description of the Focus Groups

The selection of the focus groups was based on two main criteria: Degree of urbanisation and incidence of crime. Figure 1 illustrates the selection process of the four core cases.

Figure 1: Sampling frame – Core cases



First, all municipalities were divided into urban and rural areas using data from the *Encuesta Continua de Hogares* (ECH 2012). The applied benchmark for urban cases was at 75 per cent urbanisation or higher, the one for rural at 25 per cent or lower respectively. In a second step, this sample was merged with official criminal statistics as reported by the *Policía Nacional de Nicaragua* (2013). To identify municipalities with high and low incidence of crime for both rural and urban areas, the number of criminal charges per 10,000 inhabitants was calculated and indexed into deciles. The selection criteria applied here was an index of seven or higher for high-crime areas and of four or lower for low-crime areas. Further

variables used for the case selection from the aforementioned sample were the youth-to-adult ratio, population density and poverty rates. As indicated in Figure 1 this selection process led to the municipalities for the four core cases:

- Urban High Crime (UHC): Ciudad Sandino (Department: Managua)
- Urban Low Crime (ULC): Mateare (Department: Managua)
- Rural High Crime (RHC): El Tuma (Department: Matagalpa)
- Rural Low Crime (RLC): San Ramón (Department: Matagalpa)

In addition to the four core cases, further six focus group discussions have been conducted to address potential regional differences as well as to capture strongly political active youth:

- Youth wing of the *Partido Liberal Independiente* (PLI)
- Youth wing of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN)
- Youth wing of the *Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista* (MRS)
- Youth having received a leadership training by a foreign political party foundation (LED)
- Youth studying at the *Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University* (BLU)
- Youth living in the community “El Canal” in Bluefields (BLC)

In total, 74 young people participated in the focus group discussions which took place in the respective municipalities between February and March 2015. The main features of each group are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Key characteristics of focus groups

| | Name | Code | Municipality | Urbaniza- tion (%) | Incidence of crime (decile) | Group size | Male | Female | Age (mean) |
|------------------|---------------------|------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|------------|------------|---------------|
| CORE CASES | Urban High Crime | UHC | Ciudad Sandino | 92.81 | 10.00 | 6 | 17% | 83% | 19 |
| | Urban Low Crime | ULC | Mateare | 90.15 | 1.00 | 11 | 45% | 55% | 20 |
| | Rural High Crime | RHC | El Tuma | 0.00 | 7.00 | 6 | 67% | 33% | 24 |
| | Rural Low Crime | RLC | San Ramón | 0.00 | 4.00 | 5 | 60% | 40% | 21 |
| POLITICLY ACTIVE | PLI youth wing | PLI | Managua | N/A | N/A | 5 | 80% | 20% | 27 |
| | FSLN youth wing | FJS | Bluefields | N/A | N/A | 6 | 33% | 67% | 24 |
| | MRS youth wing | MRS | Managua | N/A | N/A | 7 | 71% | 29% | 26 |
| | Leadership training | LED | Managua | N/A | N/A | 10 | 40% | 60% | 25 |
| RE- GIONAL | Bluefields BICU | BLU | Bluefields | N/A | N/A | 8 | 63% | 38% | 26 |
| | Bluefields El Canal | BLC | Bluefields | N/A | N/A | 10 | 90% | 10% | 23 |
| | TOTAL | | | | | 7.4 | 57% | 43% | 23 |

Source: Authors' calculation based on FGD questionnaires.

The group size varied between 5 and 11 participants with an average of 7.4 per group. In some groups one gender was clearly dominating, for instance women (83 per cent) in the urban high crime group or men (90 per cent) in the regional case of “Bluefields El Canal”. However, the overall gender distribution was balanced within the sampling population with a slight surplus of male participants (57 per cent). The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 27 years within the groups with an overall average of 23 years. The focus group discussions were moderated by a facilitator in Spanish language and took between 60 and 90 minutes. The group atmosphere was open and familiar since most participants knew each other. Before each focus group discussion participants

were asked to fill-in a short and anonymous questionnaire capturing socioeconomic characteristics, interest and opinion on political and economic participation, an assessment of basic services provided within their community and the perceived security situation. The actual focus group discussions started with an introductory round and ended with a wrap-up exercise to summarise and prioritise the discussed topics.

Focus group discussions covered a wide range of topics. However, the following themes have been raised by each group:

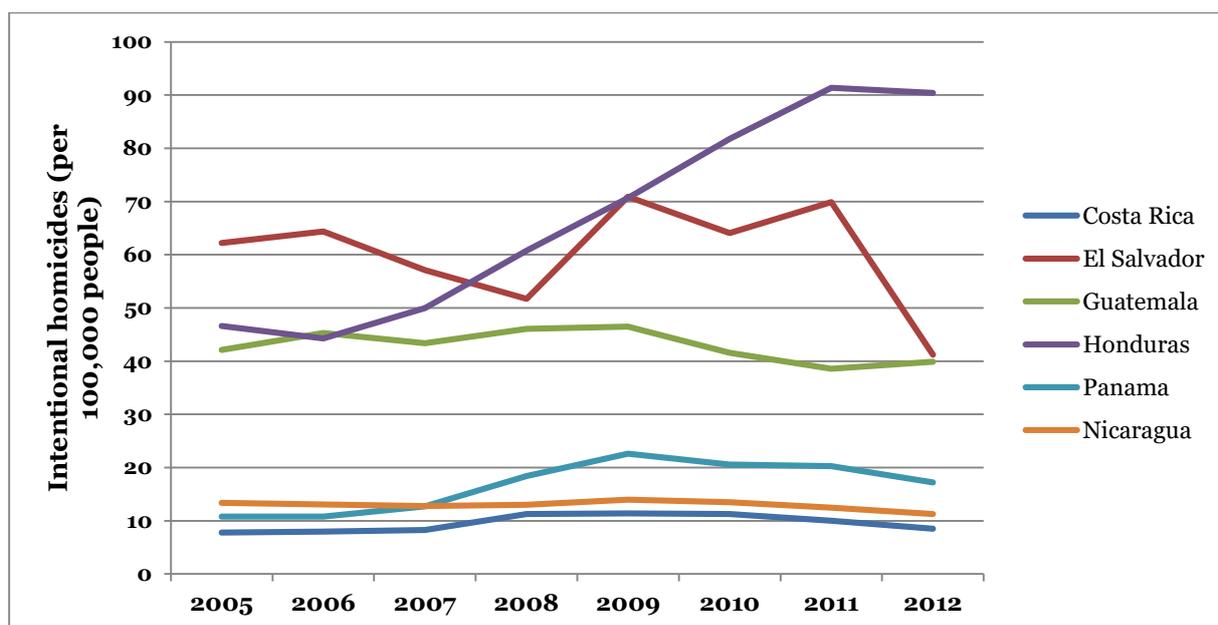
- Employment opportunities
- Political participation
- Violence and security
- Migration

Violence Assessment

Nicaragua claims to be amongst the safest countries in Central America. With a rate of 11 intentional homicides per 100,000 people; Nicaragua indeed ranks second place of the safest countries in the region. As shown in

Figure 2, it is only surpassed by Costa Rica. Panama follows on third place with 17 intentional homicides per 100,000 people.

Figure 2: Intentional homicides in Central America (2005-2012)



Source: World Bank 2012.

Even though Nicaragua shows a relative low homicide rate, other forms of violence are more prevalent, such as: domestic and sexual violence and drug-related crimes (Zinecker 2012).

The **abuse of substances**, in particular of alcohol, marijuana and inhalant drugs, was mentioned in almost every FGD. Especially in urban areas and along the coast participants assess the situation as par-

ticularly bad (1.7/5)¹. Participants complain that consumption is increasingly taking place in public spaces which they then consider as insecure; especially at night. In consequence, they feel deprived of these spaces and bewail that many citizens do not intervene but rather prefer looking the other way. Moreover, they notice that people abusing substances are becoming increasingly younger: “What

¹ Participants were asked to rate the prevalence of substance abuse in their neighbourhood using a scale from zero (a lot) to five (very few).

depresses me the most is that it is now children, adolescents and young adults who are doing such things” (UHC). The abuse of substances often comes along with consumption-related **crimes**, such as *thefts* and *assaults*, as it was mentioned in several FGD. About half of all FGD participants have been directly affected by violence within the past five years. Interesting to note, none of the respondents of the two high crime areas reported having been a victim of crime. In low crime districts, on the other hand, about one quarter of participants in rural areas and almost three-quarter in urban areas do so. A recent study conducted by Sánchez et al. (2015, 61) confirms that young people in the age of 16 to 35 years most often became victims of assaults.

Apart from thefts and assaults, *domestic* and *sexual violence* is one of the predominant types of violence participants reported; often in combination with each other. According to the annual police statistics intra-household crimes raised by over 33 per cent between 2011 and 2012 (Policía Nacional de Nicaragua 2013, 198). At the same time sexual violence, in particular against women, only increased slightly (0.5 per cent). Young people, especially in rural and coastal areas, confirm this negative trend and particularise various stories where family members raise their hand against other members.

Moreover, young people feel violated in their right through **discrimination**. Four

types of discrimination emerged in the FGD: gender discrimination, adultism, discrimination for sexual preference and ethnic discrimination. First and most frequently mentioned: *gender discrimination*. Participants depict the strong presence of *machismo* in the Nicaraguan society. Women feel suppressed by male family members and/or their partners. They also feel excluded, for instance from the educational system or the labour market, since in some cases their participation is denied by their relatives or partner. According to an expert, rural women suffer the most under these conditions since in these areas “parents prefer their male children to study and work, and their female children to help in the household” (ACT1). In any case, this form of discrimination and exclusion creates a strong economic dependency of women towards their family or partner. At the same time they feel constraint in the free development of their personality by facing everyday barriers ranging from the choice of cloth to prevent sexual harassment to being denied a job for refusing sexual favours.

Frequently mentioned in both FGD and expert interviews was discrimination for the sheer fact of being young; or *adultism*. Participants describe how elder citizens do not take their opinion into account. They do not feel heard or taken seriously and miss the adults believing in the youths’ potential and capabilities; even though they are frequently told to be the future of

the country. In consequence they feel deprived of their own opinion and marginalised within society.

Another form of discrimination is taking place for one's *sexual preference*. This mostly seems to be prevalent in urban areas. Same-sex partnerships are frowned upon in public and participants report to have witnessed verbal assaults or even physical attacks.

For participants in the coastal areas *ethnic discrimination* is the most common and openly expressed type of discrimination. They describe situations of hostility in all kind of public spaces. Especially at schools, where different ethnicities are pooled together, pupils are teasing each other for their skin colour, traditions or language. Regarding the latter, young people from the coast also experience institutional discrimination if – as it is often the case – their mother tongue is not English, the main language of instruction.

One of the experts from academia summarises the interconnectedness of the different forms of discrimination this way: “Being young, indigenous, and female from a rural area it is almost impossible to active-

ly participate in the society” (ACA3).

Another form of violence is described by FGD participants with the term power abuse or **political violence**. In all FGD, with the exception of the FJS group, participants describe major abuse of power by the government and its institutions. In this context issues like electoral fraud, manipulation of national statistics, corruption, misallocation of public resources, manipulation of the media, breaking laws and regulations were mentioned to name but a few.

With regards to direct physical violence it is important to distinguish between **pandillas** and **maras** to allow for a proper comparison of Nicaragua and El Salvador, the second Central American case study. A common differentiation is the following: *Maras* are youth gangs which are rather long-lasting, robust, hierarchical and cross-border organised and highly violent. *Pandillas* on the other hand are less long-lasting and robust, organised less hierarchical and are mostly locally operating youth gangs (cf. Bruneau 2014; Zinecker 2012; Oettler 2011). Even though both



Ciudad Sandino, Managua, February 2015

terms were frequently mentioned in FGD, Nicaragua is only to a small extent affected by pandillas and even less by maras: “Between 1997 and 2006, the national police registered 265 pandillas with a total of 4,000 members; hence an average of 16 members per pandilla. Therefore, we do not have maras in Nicaragua [as they can

be found in other Central American countries]. There are adolescents and youth at social risk” (CSO5). When referring to these youth at risk who appear as domestic youth gangs, “people in Nicaragua [...] mainly use the term ‘pandilla’” as Oettler (2011, 263) notes.

Opportunities and challenges for the transitions to adulthood

Family formation and social ties

On average, the majority of Nicaragua’s youth aged 16 to 29 years is single, as illustrated in Table 2. While this holds true for urban areas where most young people are

located, a slight majority (53 per cent) of rural youth is either married or living in civil union.

Table 2: Civil status of youth aged 16-29 (in %)

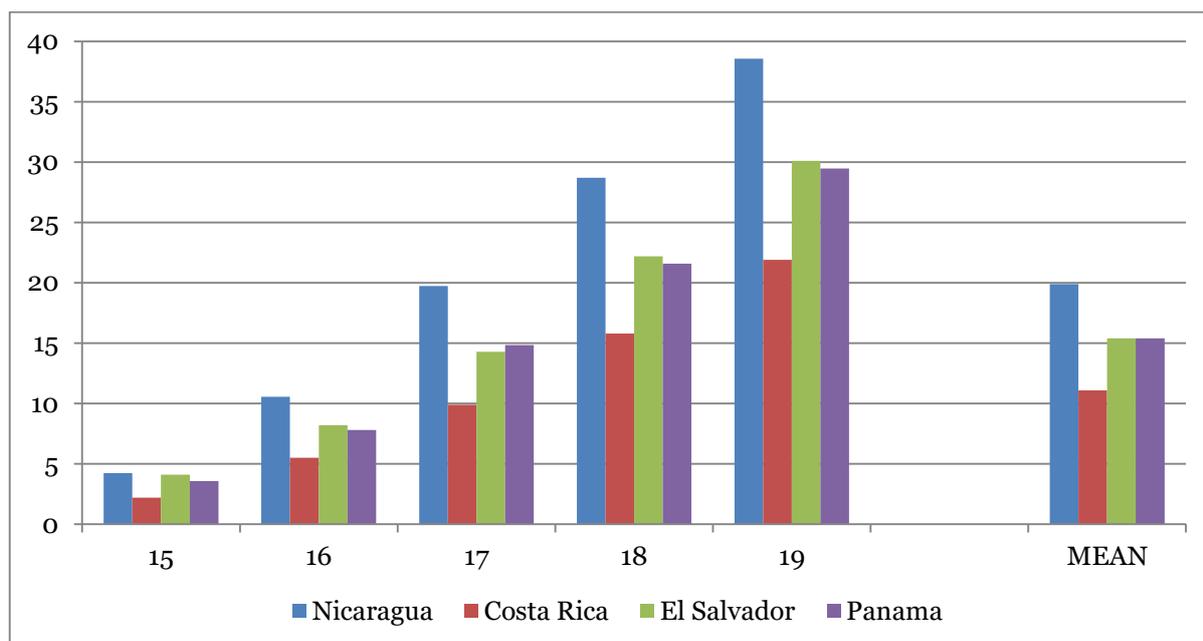
| Estado civil | Urban | Rural | Total |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Single | 60.13 | 45.21 | 54.51 |
| Married | 14.15 | 18.09 | 15.63 |
| Civil union | 22.83 | 34.57 | 27.25 |
| Separated / divorced | 2.89 | 2.13 | 2.6 |

Source: LAPOP 2014.

In our sample, about half of the participants state their civil status to be single. Also here we observe a higher fraction of singles in urban areas (53 per cent) compared to rural areas (27 per cent). However, in the latter case participants have been slightly older. Of the young people who are not yet in a committed relationship eight out of ten express the desire of starting a family.

In some cases the wish for an own family becomes true already at an early age; either because of the sheer wish for a child or because of the lack of prevention. Figure 3 shows that on average almost 20 per cent of Nicaraguan women between the age of 15 and 19 have children already. Compared to other selected Central American countries Nicaragua exceeds those by about five percentage points.

Figure 3: Percentage of women being mother according to age



Source: CELADE 2015b; Loaiza and Liang 2013.

According to the World Bank (2013a) the trend of child or adolescent pregnancies is constantly decreasing. However, with 99 births per 1,000 women between 15 and 19 years, Nicaragua still shows the highest fertility rate of adolescent women in Central America.

Several experts identified pregnancies at young age as one of the major obstacles in the transition to adulthood; or the other way around as an express transition: “Overnight, children stop being children. Not even being capable to take responsible for themselves, they wake up with a huge responsibility for a child” (CSO3).

One of the main reasons for why adolescent pregnancies are seen in the low quality of sexual education students receive, explains an expert from academia: “There are several women and youth organisations who would like to provide sexual education. But there

has not been a synergy between the state and the civil society to foster and promote such strategies” (ACA1). The interviewee further elaborates on the discrepancy between the government and the civil society and concluded that “many times, such initiatives are perceived as critical or even anti-state activities and the ones suffering are the children and adolescents” (ACA1). Another factor is sexual violence: “Unfortunately, in many cases [child] pregnancy is a result of sexual abuse [...] and there is a culture which tolerates this in a way. Often [the abuse] is happening by persons who are close to the family or even family members. Such cases are extremely worrisome” (ACA1). The prevalence of sexual abuse was confirmed in several expert interviews and also raised as a topic in various FGD.

In summary, family life and starting an own family appear to be a central passage to adulthood for Nicaragua’s youth. In this

context, family ties are also an important aspect for the formation of youth themselves. On the question “who do you perceive as a role model in your community?”, close to

100 per cent of the participants named their closest family members; mainly parents or siblings.

Legal framework of participation and youth policies

The former president of Nicaragua, Enrique José Bolaños Geyer, once declared: “The participation of Nicaragua’s youth has always been determining in the political, social and cultural processes along the country’s history” (Secretaría de la Juventud 2005, 50). In line with this perspective the Nicaraguan Constitution provides the framework for participation: “The citizens have the right to participate under equal conditions in political aspects and State leadership. By law the effective participation of the people is guaranteed; on national and local level”²(Gobierno de Nicaragua 2014, Art. 50). Equal opportunities are guaranteed in Article 48: “For all Nicaraguans unconditional equality is established to execute their political rights. [...] It is the government’s obligation to eliminate all obstacles which impede the equality between Nicaraguans and their effective participation in the political, economic and social life in the country”³. The actual involvement of citizens in

the political decision making process is further specified in the Law of Civil Participation (*Ley de Participación Ciudadana*). This law invites citizens’ initiatives on national, regional or local level and further offers space for public consultations.

The young peoples’ needs are particularly taken care off with the Law to Promote the Integral Development of the Youth (Spanish: *Ley de Promoción del Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud*). A major part of this law is dedicated to the participation of the youth and their opportunities to execute their political rights. In these sections, the responsible national, regional and local institutions and their respective mandate are named.

²Art. 50: *Los ciudadanos tienen derecho de participar en igualdad de condiciones en los asuntos públicos y en la gestión estatal. Por medio de la ley se garantizará, nacional y localmente, la participación efectiva del pueblo.*

³Art. 48: *Se establece la igualdad incondicional de todos los nicaragüenses en el goce de sus derechos políticos [...] Es oblió de hecho la igualdad entre los*

nicaragüenses y su participación efectiva en la vida política, económica y social del país.

Political participation

Despite of these plenty spaces provided for participation by the legislature, youth participation is rather low. The most direct way of participation in a democratic system are elections. According to LAPOP (2014), slightly more than half of the youth in voting age have executed their voting

right in the last presidential elections in 2011 (Table 3). At the same time, the participation of the overall population in voting age was at almost 70 per cent, meaning 17 percentage points higher.

Table 3: Participation in last presidential elections (in %)

| | Urban | Rural | Total |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total voting age population | 69.02 | 70.38 | 69.53 |
| Youth (16-29 years) | 52.73 | 52.69 | 52.72 |

Source: LAPOP 2014.

In our sample, almost three-quarters of the FGD participants voted in the last local and/or national elections or would have done so if meeting the criteria of voting eligibility. This number decreases by almost 10 percentage points to about 62 per cent if we disregard the four so-called politically active groups; namely LED, FJS, MRS and PLI. Apart from technical reasons (e.g. no ID card, illness, lack of time, etc.) why people did not go voting, mistrust towards the political system has been raised frequently:

“they are all liars and renege on their promises” (UHC), “it is always the same major or president winning” (ULC), “vote counting is not trustworthy” (MRS), “broken promises” (BLC), “waste of time” (PLI). These perceptions are in line with the findings of a study conducted by the European Union and Oxfam (2014). In their report the authors conclude that there is a significant number of young people abstaining from elections because of a lack of trust in the political system: “[...] the fear of electoral fraud and the

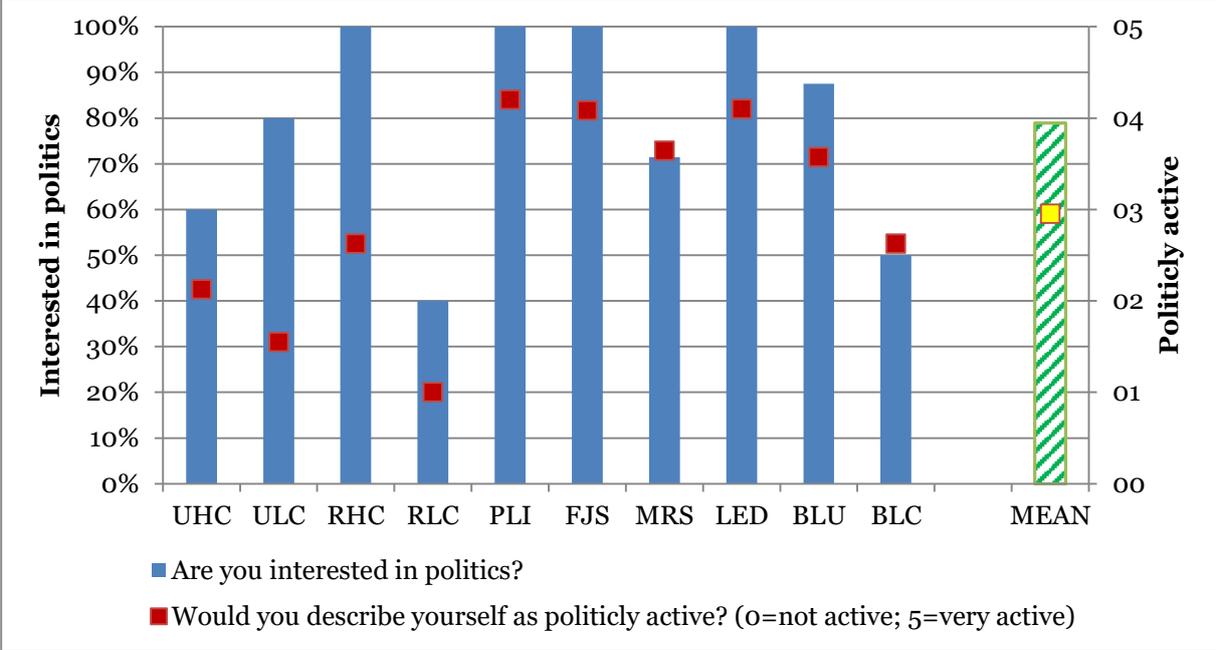


Mateare, Managua, February 2015

poor inclusion of the youths’ needs causes abstention from voting” (European Union and Oxfam 2014, 73). Abstaining from elections is, however, not a youth-only phenomenon. Especially for national elections the voter turnout is decreasing in Nicaragua; between 2001 and 2011 by almost 30 percentage points (European Union and Oxfam 2014, 20). The same negative trend can be observed for elections on regional and municipality level, even though less pronounced.

Often a low voter turnout is associated with a general lack of interest in politics. Especially the elder generation in Nicaragua seems to claim this for the youth: “The former generation sees today’s youth as apathetic. They are not interested in politics and only worry about sports and their own pleasure” (JOU). At least this does not hold true for the youth sampled in this study, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Interest in politics and political activeness



Source: Authors’ calculation based on FGD questionnaires.

On average, almost 80 per cent declare their general interest in politics. Apart from the youth affiliated to the MRS party, all political active FGD participants are highly interested (100 per cent). If we disregard the political active groups this share is still at 70 per cent. Patterns regarding urbanisation or level of crime as well as regional differences

are not evident. For the four core groups, participants of the rural low crime area appear the least interested ones and expressed their disappointment very clear during the discussion: “Decisions are exclusively taken by the local or national government and our participation in this process is not desired.

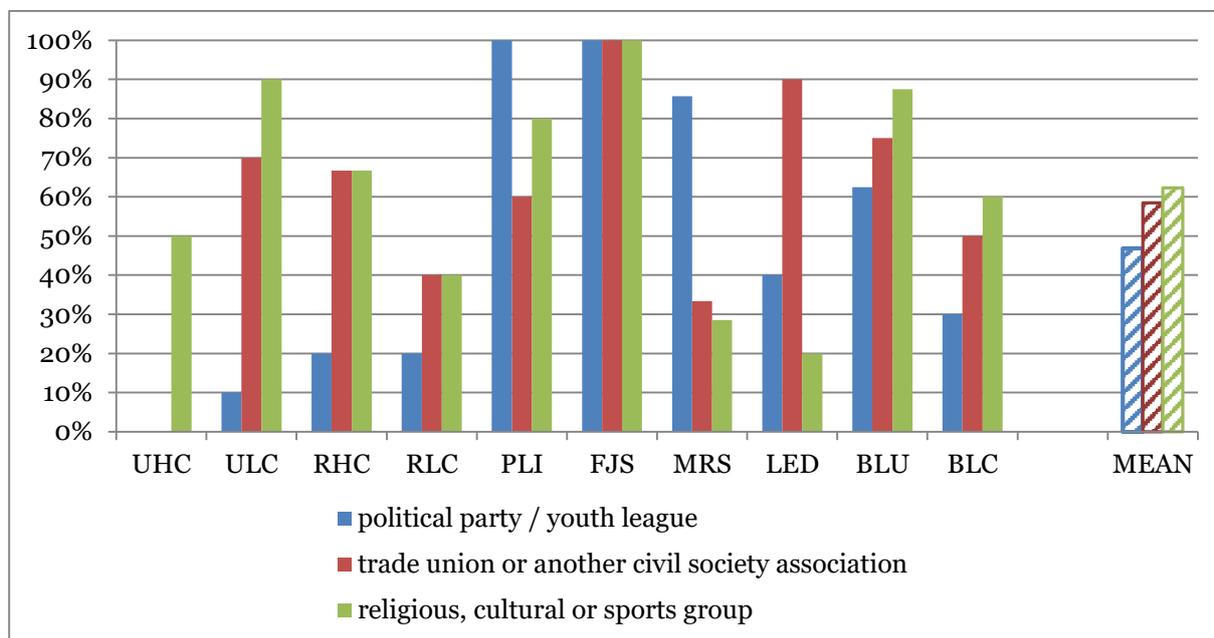
[...] Hence, I simply feel not represented by these decision makers” (RLC).

To assess the extent of one’s individual political activeness participants were asked to rank themselves on a scale from zero to five; zero describing them as not active and five as very active. With an average value of three, participants describe themselves as upper-middle active. Also here the value might be driven by the four politically active groups (LED, FJS, MRS and PLI). When leaving out these groups the result decreases to a lower-middle value of 2.2. We further observe a tendency of higher activeness in high crime areas but differences are rather marginal. Following politics does also not

necessarily imply an active involvement. In some groups, for instance ULC and RHC, we see a relatively high interest in politics accompanied by a rather low rate of personal involvement. In other groups it is the opposite case: While only half of the participants of BLC are interested in politics their political activeness is above average at 2.6.

Another form of participation is the active membership in *political and/or civil society organisations*. Figure 5 illustrates the membership of FGD participants in (i) political parties or their youth leagues, (ii) trade unions or other civil society associations like student unions, and (iii) religious, cultural or sports groups.

Figure 5: Membership in political and/or civil society organisations



Source: Authors’ calculation based on FGD questionnaires.

About half of the participants are member of a political party. Obviously, this share is particular high for the FGD conducted with young people affiliated to the respective

parties (FJS, MRS and PLI). If we ignore these groups the share drops down to 26 per cent. Compared to the four core cases which show an average of 13 per cent, political par-

ty membership is more pronounced in the coastal area (46 per cent). During the FGD the reasons for the reluctance came out into light: Often times, young people do not feel their interests represented by the party and their voice ignored: “It is strange to be in the Juventud Sandinista; one cannot be critical or say anything against the government without being attacked” (ULC). Even though the youth acknowledges the quota system which is applied by most political parties to increase the share of young people, they still feel that “most spaces for participation are occupied by dinosaurs” (LED). A leading politician from an opposition party acknowledges that many political parties do not meet the aspirations of the youth; and an activist adds: “Today’s youth does not want to participate in the spaces where all the elder generation is involved; they want to find their own way” (ACT2). Also here we find strong similarities to the report referred to earlier: “The vast majority of adolescents and youth do not feel represented by the political parties, especially because of corruption, clientelism and caudillism, but also because of the adultism within the party structure” (European Union and Oxfam 2014, 73).

While we find a general disappointment in terms of representation amongst all youth there is no evidence for gender discrepancy. This is in line with an annual global ranking of women in politics where Nicaragua ranks on the fifth position of women in ministerial positions and still on place 15 regarding the

share of women in national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women 2015).

Trade unions and other civil society organisations are slightly more often frequented by young people in our sample and almost reach a share of 60 per cent. According to young leaders of different labour and trade unions, the reasons for a higher willingness to participate in these unions might be the different approach they are pursuing. They have several quota systems on all hierarchical levels, i.e. in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. However, also these young leaders observe adultism within their organisations: “Elders see the young as enemies and it requires a lot of tactfulness to trigger a rethinking and allow for a transition” (SIND). Nevertheless, mistrust is also an important issue the unions are facing. A study conducted by Ramos et al. (2012) found that only one out of ten young people aged 15 to 29 years have much or complete trust in labour and trade unions.

The most relevant forms of participation for the youth in our sample are *religious, cultural and sports groups*; almost two-thirds are participating in at least one of them, mostly in religious groups. In contrast to political parties, religious organisations intend to focus on and impart core values to the youth. Moreover, the church seems to provide a space for the youth to exchange opinions freely: “Political parties are brainwashing the young people. We, instead, invite them to talk about any topic they have

on their mind” (CHU1). In particular women accept this offer: “There are more women interested [in our topics] and they also rely more on us to address topics which are not new but tabooed in the society; for instance domestic violence and child pregnancy” (CHU2). Compared to the previous two groups, the church as an institution enjoys the youth’s confidence and ranks on first place before the communication media and the national police (UNDP 2011, 196). Religious leaders themselves have a rather high reputation, too. On average, almost 40 per cent trust their religious leader (Ramos et al. 2012, 86). Nevertheless, the majority of over 60 per cent has no or only few trust in them. Religious institutions are also perceived as a promoter of knowledge about rights and responsibilities. In a study by Montenegro et al. (2001, 56) the church ranks right after the family on second place; way before the media (mid-table) and political parties (last place). Cultural activities and sports clubs also provide spaces for participation to the youth. In many cases, these groups are hosted by non-governmental organisations (NGOs); often coming from abroad. In general, these NGOs offer a space to meet and

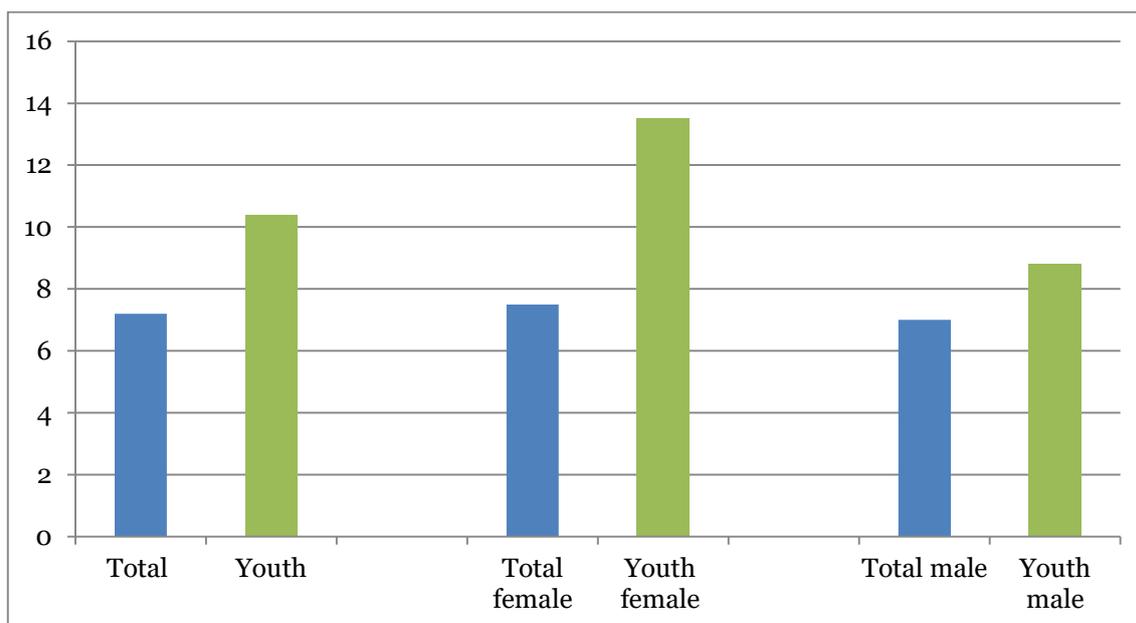
exchange in an informal atmosphere but also provide specific trainings (e.g. leadership trainings) or courses (e.g. mural art classes) to empower the youth. The youths’ view on such NGOs is in two minds. On the one hand they appreciate having a space to exchange ideas, acquire new skills and receive support. On the other hand they criticise a lack of sustainability: “They come and teach us how to participate and express our opinion but then they leave and there are still no formal spaces to apply it” (MRS). Moreover, they are missing a direct channel to the government to push their ideas forward to a level where they could materialise. The director of a NGO confirmed this perception and explains that the exchange between civil society organisations and the government has been diminished significantly over the past years and that “NGOs are observed with great mistrust by the government” (CSO5). Ramos et al. (2012) also question the sustainability of projects implemented by international organisations. They even go a step further and point out the negative consequence of a dependency of international organisations.

Economic opportunities

Since the end of the armed conflict in 1990, Nicaragua experienced a constant economic upswing. Between 1990 and 2014 the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita increased by almost 60 per cent with annual growth rate of 3.5 per cent. Also in

recent years this growth continued with positive rates of around five per cent (World Bank 2013b). However, this economic upswing has not reached all Nicaraguans equally, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Unemployment rates by sex in 2013 (as % of labour force)



Source: (World Bank 2013c; World Bank 2013d).

Note: Youth: % of labour force aged 15-24 years

In 2013, about seven per cent of the total Nicaraguan labour force was without employment. Especially young people aged 15-24 years are particularly affected; with an unemployment rate of over ten per cent. Regarding gender, the overall unemployment rate does not differ greatly. However, we observe a significant difference for young people seeking employment: While less than nine per cent of male Nicaraguans have been without employment in 2013, this rate is 4.5 percentage points higher for young females.

These numbers were constantly affirmed in the FGD. In general, jobs for early-career youth are criticised for the short term nature of the contract, the long hours which have to be worked and the low remuneration. In the follow-up questions, participants identified numerous obstacles for

young people trying to enter the labour market: First and most frequently mentioned were the job requirements. The few jobs available for early-career people require good education, work experience, good contacts and for many positions even a political party membership; usually with the ruling party. However, these requirements are difficult to meet.

In terms of *education*, Nicaragua made significant progress over the past decades. The goal of universal primary education has been almost reached and the country shows a net enrolment rate of over 90 per cent. This rate, however, drops to less than 50 per cent for secondary education (EPDC 2014). About 80 per cent of the FGD participants in our sample have some or completed secondary education. In all groups the quality of the low investment in the public educational system was criticised: The syllabus

and text books are claimed to be out-dated and facilities not maintained. In urban areas private schools are considered as an alternative to obtain high-level education which facilitates the transition to work. In rural areas this option as well as general access to tertiary education is usually not available or implies long distance traveling. Moreover, participants see a clear mismatch of the labour market requirements and the knowledge and skills provided by the educational system, for instance in terms of promoting entrepreneurship: “They teach us how to be an employee but not how to be an entrepreneur. I don’t want to learn how to operate a truck; I want to learn how to operate a business” (MRS). Several participants in different groups also raised the point that the government has no interest in equipping their citizens with knowledge: “Our government is not interested in educating us; they don’t want to create critical minds” (BLU). This view was also shared by several experts: “[The government] has no interest to provide a reflective and critical education so that young people learn how to think, to reflect, to express, to discuss and to take decisions. Even if they [governmental officials] do not admit it, it is absolutely obvious” (ACA2).

Once having obtained a degree, the transition into the professional life entails another obstacle for young people since they are usually lacking *work experience*. According to the participants there are only three ways: Do an internship, accept a low-quality job or

have good contacts. Especially for young people who have already started a family, an internship is not an option since it is usually not subject to the minimum wage and hence unpaid. In urban areas, enterprises operating in Nicaragua’s Free Trade Zones, the so called *maquilas*, are often the only option for the youth to gain work experience. However, these maquilas have a doubtful reputation. On the one hand they offer many jobs, especially for young people, and pay according to the national minimum wage. On the other hand maquilas are frequently criticised by national and international organisations for violating workers’ rights or even general human rights. Representatives of different Nicaraguan labour unions which have been interviewed, report that “occupational safety standards are not met, general breaks and toilet visits are denied, and the formation of interest groups is sabotaged” (SIND). Although maquilas are less common in rural areas, also here they are considered as potential employers; even though it requires traveling and the involved costs of it. Most jobs for rural young people are provided by the agricultural sector; especially for men as harvest hand. For young women, helping in the household or being a domestic worker are often the only options available. Compared to maquilas, working conditions are considered as more acceptable but young people seeking jobs outside agriculture or the household still miss opportunities for gaining relevant work experience.

A door opener for entering the labour market which was frequently mentioned throughout all FGD are *good contacts*. Participants distinguished between general contacts and contacts through the affiliation to a political party. General contacts can be built already at school, in particular at private schools, or already exist between families: “It’s a closed circle. Parents [running family businesses] know each other and bring in their children” (MRS). Contacts through party affiliation have a different nature. Participants report that the membership of a political party cannot only be beneficial for getting a job but also be set as an (informal) requirement. Especially in the public sector a proof of membership (*Carnet de Militante*) is asked for: “When I handed in my application documents for a job at the local authority they revised it and told me I need a letter of affiliation. Since I am not a member they gave me back my documents and send me away” (ULC). Similar stories were told by several participants of different groups; in all cases participants referred to the ruling party. In addition to the public sector, an affiliation is increasingly demanded in the private sector. An expert

from academia explained that private entrepreneurs themselves are encouraged to join the party in order to be successful in public tenure procedures. As a consequence political party affiliation becomes more and more important in the private sector, too. In several FGD the hopelessness of participants was so pronounced that the majority considered a party membership solely to obtain a job even though they do not share the parties’ ideology or values. Also in terms of economic opportunities women seem to be disadvantaged and several female participants stressed the point that finding a job is difficult: “As a women, it is even more difficult. If you enter a men’s world [here: running a business] you are not taken serious by other male entrepreneurs. They question your capabilities and education” (MRS). A recent study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) confirms this perception and concludes that “one cannot observe substantial changes in the patriarchal roles of the Nicaraguan society [and] not even significant progress in terms of the average gender pay gap on the labour market” (UNDP 2014, 45).



El Canal, Bluefields, February 2015

Governability, state and civil society

The Nicaraguan legislation provides a variety of laws and regulations to allow for participation of its citizens. This, however, brings up the question of why Nicaraguan citizen in general and the youth in particular do not feel represented by their government; and moreover, why there is – apart from the National Police – such a low level of trust in governmental institutions (see for instance European Union and Oxfam 2014; Ramos et al. 2012).

Several experts interviewed for this study describe the **relationship between the government and the civil society** as tense and problematic. Even though formal spaces are *de jure* available and freely accessible, *de facto* they are not. Across all FGD – with the exception of the FJS – a clear distrust in governmental institutions became evident. They feel basic human rights violated, for instance the right of free assembly and freedom of speech: “If you use the formal spaces by attending community consultations and give your opinion they cut you short and hinder you from speaking. In practice, there is no free speech” (ULC). The distrust was also explained with the non-compliance of governmental institutions with prevailing legal norms and regulations. “The government doesn’t comply with its own laws and regulations” (ULC) and is even “manipulating the constitution however it suits them best” (UHC). Especially in terms of elections, many participants see

clear evidence of electoral fraud, committed on the highest level, the Supreme Electoral Council (Spanish: *Consejo Supremo Electoral*). Vote counting is not trustworthy, the secrecy of ballot not secured, the listing of candidates non-transparent and registration in the electoral register cumbersome, to name but a few examples raised during the FGD. Many times, participants even drew a parallel between today’s government and the Somoza⁴ regime and clearly categorised the current governmental form as “dictatorship” and the president-in-office as “the new Somoza”.

Dictatorial features can be also observed in terms of dissemination of information. Interviewees and FGD participants describe that all information is centralised with the countries First Lady who also acts as the government’s lead spokeswoman. Moreover, the government is involved or even regulates almost all national television and radio stations. Young people fear that “the government wants and does control all public spaces, especially the information systems” (PLI). In terms of active political participation, experts and FGD participants describe a huge gap between community consultation in theory and in practice: “They [government] do not consult us. They just come

⁴Anastasio Somoza Debayle was President of Nicaragua from 1967-1972 and from 1974-1979 when his dictatorship was overthrown during the Nicaraguan Revolution.

to town to announce decision which are already taken; not to hear our opinion or even consult us” (ULC). This point became particularly important when participants got onto the subject of the *Gran Canal*⁵. In this context, they feel very badly informed and suspect the authorities to systematically withhold relevant information. The little official data available is considered as incomplete, biased and not trustworthy. Consequently, a lot of contradicting information is circulating; for instance, regarding the investor, the benefits and the disadvantages for the country and its citizens.

A peculiarity in Nicaragua is the special relationship between the Caribbean coast and the rest of the country. Since the late 1980s the coastal area comprises of two regions with limited self-governed: the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN) and the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCS). Here we could observe a particular critical attitude towards the “mainland government” which had already turned into disappointment and resignation: “We do not expect anything anymore from the government” (BLC). At the same time a strong community spirit could be noted with a hands-on mentality to compensate the shortcomings by the government: “Instead of waiting for the government to clean the drainage channel we get together and do it

ourselves; and the neighbours are supporting us with tools and food” (ULC).

The **relationship between political parties and the civil society** is also described as difficult. The general distrust in political parties and their leaders gave occasion to further investigate the reasons. In general, all parties are considered as open and accessible. Quota systems regarding age and gender, open additional opportunities for participation. Most of the parties also provide direct benefits to their young members, for instance scholarships or skill trainings. However, the space for participation and also the benefits parties provide come at a price. “They grant space but not to participate but to serve them” (CSO3), explains the director of a NGO. To receive a scholarship and especially to retain it, active participation in the parties’ assemblies and manifestations are indispensable. One participant describes how he lost his scholarship for being unexcused absence two times from the weekly party assembly in his community. He was a scholarship holder of the ruling party. Other participants had been threatened by other party followers after they have voiced an opinion against the party line during an assembly. All of them are (former) members of the ruling party. Especially within the governing party, critical opinions seem not to be well perceived: “They do not accept critical voices” (RHC); instead “they bring people from far away because they know that they will not oppose” (ULC). It seems like the parties focus is not on provid-

⁵ The Grand Canal is an investment project to construct a shipping-route connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

ing a space for actual participation but on using the youth for their needs: “They are not interested in their opinion. They don’t take them serious. They use the youth as tools, to cheer at their assemblies or to distribute flyers during campaigns” (JOU). The youth themselves have a similar feeling: “They give us promises and more promises during their campaigns [...] but as soon as

elections are over they forget about us and ignore us” (BLC). And if they are not dependent on the benefits provided by the party they even prefer to abstain from manifestations: “I do not see benefits in participating; they only give you a soft drink and a sandwich” (UHC). Such statements were voiced across all FGD.

Navigating blocked transitions

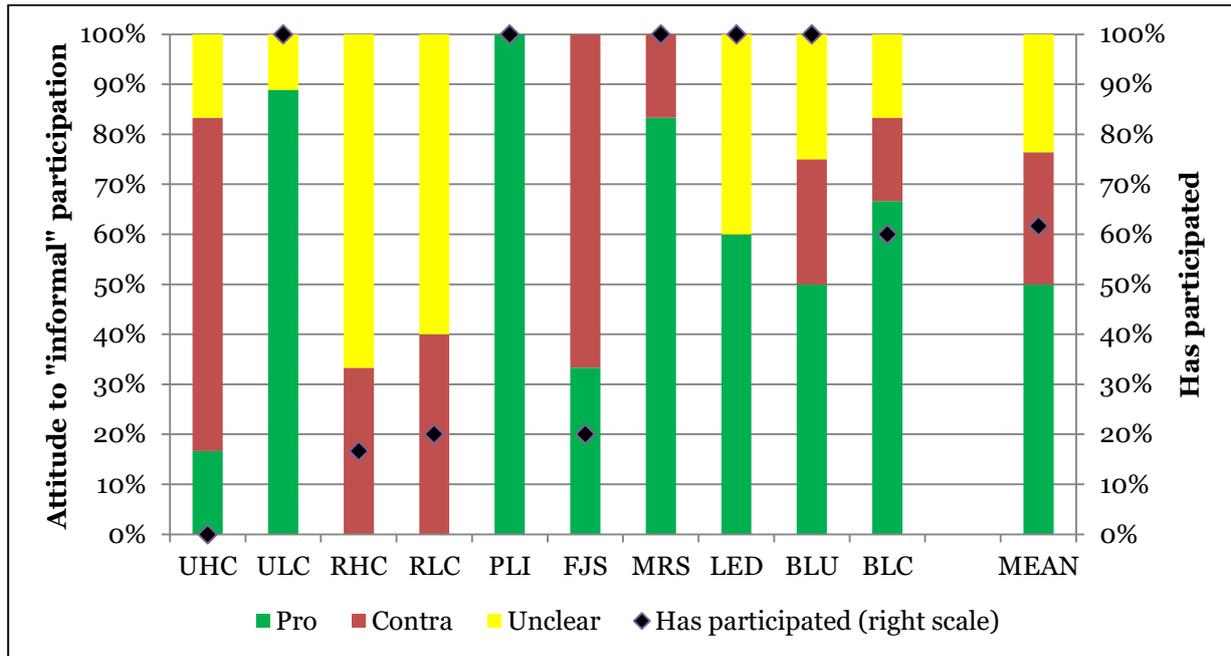
The transition to adulthood does not necessarily follow a linear path. As shown in the previous section, key components such as family formation, economic independency and political citizenship are not easy to achieve. Even more, for Nicaragua’s youth it seems to be a path of trial and tribulation. The following chapter elaborates how young Nicaraguans navigate through these blocked transitions.

Manifestations of voice

The previous chapters showed that Nicaragua’s youth is facing major obstacles to formally participate in political processes. However, this does not mean that they are

not participating at all but rather that they identified alternative means and spaces to take part. In contrast to the formal ways of participation which include the execution of voting rights, joining a youth league of a political party or running for an office, other ways of participation comprise all kind of spaces which are not directly provided by the legislator, its governmental institutions and/or non-governmental institutions (e.g. religious groups, NGOs, sport clubs, etc.). The main focus is hence on alternative ways of expression such as protests, demonstrations, boycotts, riots and marches. Figure 7 displays the general attitude to such “informal” ways of participation amongst the FGD participants.

Figure 7: Attitude towards alternative ways of participation



Source: Authors' calculation based on FGD questionnaires.

On average, half of the participants perceive alternative ways of expression as positive. The other half is either against (26 per cent) or not sure about them (24 per cent). However, there are major differences between the groups. While in urban areas, in particular in low crime communities, these kinds of protests do find support, there are no clear supporters in rural areas. Furthermore, we observe great divergence amongst the political party youth leagues. The youth of the opposition parties (PLI, MRS) are clearly in favour of such alternative forms but two-third of the affiliates of the governing party FJS reject them. Experience might be an explanation here: Only few FJS affiliates have ever participated in such a way while all of the PLI and MRS affiliates did so. Similar patterns can be found in the coastal areas where on average 80 per cent have at

least participated once in alternative ways of expression and two-thirds approve them. The reasons for their attitude provided by the participants are diverse. On the pro side participants clearly see them as part of the democratic system: "It's a right citizen make use of if they feel a lack of free speech" (ULC). Other supporters consider protests even as a necessity in response to the closure of formal spaces: "In our country these are necessary because we have to defend our rights at all costs" (UHC). The advocates of the opposing side seem to have had negative experiences and associate protests with violence: "It is bad because violence originates there and this is not necessary" (UHC). Several participants from different groups also doubt the impact of such alternative forms of participation and classify them as a "waste of time" (UHC, RLC). Others simply reject them more drastically: "These are

slackers and do not contribute anything” (RLC).

Lastly, the fear of governmental prosecution and repressions when participating in rather informal ways of expression was mentioned in almost all groups. An activist describes how several actions and manifestations have been impeded by single persons sabotaging. In almost all cases, the respective person could be identified as being affiliated or even member of the ruling party. Participants also shared incidents where brutal groups of youngsters (so-called *fuerzas del choque*) interfered peaceful manifestations. These troublemakers appear masked with motorcycle helmets on motorcycles and threaten participants to leave; often the

threat changed from words to blows. Several participants and experts declared that these are irregular troops sent by the local government to defeat any kind of protest: “Everybody knows that they are governmental officials” (RLC). One male participant of a FGD who is a professed member of the ruling party told that he had been offered to participate in such kind of actions by his local community leader several times. Such incidents against freedom and political rights are also observed by the Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization. Since 2007 when the current president got elected into office both the freedom and the political rights rating worsened (Freedom House 2015).



Options for exit

The closure of formal spaces of participation offered to the youth and the various reasons hindering them to use informal spaces for participation leads to frustration. This in return encourages seeking for alternatives.

In the FGD this could be observed in two ways: the desire to migrate and resignation.

On a personal level, many FGD participants declared their frustration about their personal economic situation. Being underem-

ployed, especially skill- and pay-related underemployment, or even without any employment at all, constrains young people in their opportunities. As a result, they have to compromise on important issues, as for instance: postpone to leave the parents' house and starting an own family, or quit or even not starting a higher education career in the place of generating an income. In consequence of a low(er) educational level, they often have to accept any kind of job offered; and with this the difficult and highly questionable working conditions, for instance in *maquilas*. As soon as the number of dependants increases (e.g. own children, caring for relatives) the economic situation becomes even tighter. The continuous struggle to survive and the fight against poverty in combination with a lack of opportunities were described as the major obstacles in the transition to adulthood and thus a major source of frustration by the FGD participants.

The second source of frustration results from the dissatisfaction with politics and one's personal inability to trigger a change. Participants elaborated how they feel powerless against their political system which they described with strong dictatorial features. Too many broken promises have made them losing faith in their representatives and created a feeling of being ignored and neglected. In addition, incidents of corruption, abuse of power, manipulation of laws and regulations by the current government have led to disenchantment with

politics. And the numerous obstacles they are facing and the drastic limitations of basic human rights have made them lose faith in the political system.

Several young people were able to navigate through these obstacles and were able to overcome the frustration by actively getting involved. Some of them were able to arrange with the prevailing structures, for instance by joining the youth league of a political party in order to have a voice and/or to simply meet the job requirement of being affiliated to the party. Others successfully found alternative ways of expression, for instance by joining certain movements or participating in protests. However, some young people in our sample were neither able to arrange themselves with the situation nor find an alternative way. Often, these young people have tried different approaches but – in contrast to the two previous groups – without success. As a consequence they decided to exit in a way that they resigned from taking part in the political life and instead developed a strong sense of individualism. A common statement in this regard was “It doesn't matter how we organise us, they keep ignoring us; as if we wouldn't exist” (BLC). At the same time this could also develop into a strong community spirit where neighbours help each other out because of being continuously neglected by the government. In any case it implies that these young people turn their backs on political participation.

Another form of exit is migration. In many families migration is an important topic. On average 77 per cent of the FGD participants report having family members living abroad. In almost all cases, economic reasons triggered migration, followed by political ones. In only a few cases studying and the war were mentioned. The main destination countries are Costa Rica and Panama but also Mexico, the United States and Spain. In our sample the general attitude towards migration was negative. On an individual level, migration was perceived as to abandon family members and leaving them behind. Moreover, the high risk involved for the person emigrating was mentioned by sharing stories of physical attacks and sexual assaults that occurred to relatives living abroad. The low quality of jobs available for migrants in the destination countries was also pointed out: “Women usually work as housekeeper and men as peons on construction sites” (RLC). On a more global level, the questions arose of “who will improve our country if we all leave?” (PLI). In this con-

text, *brain drain* was clearly considered as negative and impeding for the countries development. Nevertheless, some participants highlighted potential benefits of migration, such as supporting the family by sending remittances. Still, also this point was questioned by the group since remittances might also create wrong incentives to the receiver, for instance to quit school. The government is aware of the situation and concluded already ten years ago: “Nicaragua is partly losing its best human resources for being incapable of absorbing, retaining and further training them” (Secretaría de la Juventud 2005, 9). A politician from the opposition party confirms this conclusion: “The government is always talking about the youth as the present and the future but isn’t doing anything to keep them in the country” (POL1). Although the general attitude towards migration was negative it is still seen as a feasible option and the opinions alternated between “I prefer having less but being safe” (RLC) and “migration for a better life is a possibility” (BLC).

Conclusions

The Nicaraguan legislation offers a comprehensive set of spaces for participation. However, the study showed that the youth is constrained in exercising their right and that the spaces are not open and often conditional.

In terms of economic participation young people are clearly disadvantaged. Most jobs available for them are characterised by low quality in terms of working conditions and remuneration. At the same time, job requirements are high and the educational system does not equip the youth with the necessary means to meet them. In addition, an affiliation to the ruling party became an “unofficial requirement”. As a result, young people face major obstacles in the transition to adulthood, more precisely in of the transition towards economic independency.

Active participation in politics is rather low although the youth show high interest and motivation in triggering a change. Here, the

low belief of the elder generation in the capacity of the youth and the negligence of political parties beyond electoral campaigns created mistrust and political apathy. By political parties they feel (ab)used as tools. Moreover, young people seek to find their own way rather than following the patterns established by the elder generation.

Particular worrisome are the practices by the current government. The youth feels systematically excluded, monitored and limited in their basic human rights. Incidents of power abuse, intolerance towards critical minds and the use of irregular troops against alternative ways of expression have led to a negative attitude and caused frustration. Subsequently, Nicaragua’s youth can be categorised in three groups. The first group comprises of young people who arranged themselves with the current system. They feel well integrated in the economic and political system. Usually they are



strongly connected or even belong to the youth league of the ruling party. The second group are young people who are not happy with the *status quo* in the country. They are expressing their dissatisfaction with the current situation in public, usually as part of an organisation, such as the youth league of the opposition party, student councils or NGOs. Often they are frustrated about the limitations and constraints put on formal spaces of participation and hence take advantage of rather alternative ways; for instance protests. The last group is also unsatisfied with the country's current political and economic situation and frustration about the inability to participate is clearly present. In contrast to the second group they do not or no longer become politically active; not formally nor in an alternative

way. They simply gave up. Remarkable for this group is the strong desire of leaving the country. Although migration is considered as a possibility to exit, the general attitude towards it is rather negative.

What remains is the wish of the former President of Nicaragua, Enrique José Bolaños Geyer:

“The participation of the Nicaraguan youth has been determining the political, economic, social and cultural processes along the history of the country. Therefore I aspire that the capacity for innovation, the productive and reproductive potential of our young population has the necessary conditions and opportunities to play the principal role in the construction of the new Nicaragua” (Secretaría de la Juventud 2005, 50).

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