

Creating Community Capacity through Youth Empowerment: A Case Study of Rural Nicaragua

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Abstract

Rural youth development in Nicaragua has experienced a rebirth with the re-introduction of 4-H (4-S in Spanish) after nearly two decades in dormancy. This case study explored 4-S through the eyes of 94 young club members, ages 9 to 13. Using sentence completion methods, youth provided insight into the activities they found most interesting and important. Their responses were then compared with the socioeconomic and demographic realities of the youth. Findings reveal deep connections between youth and their communities and culture. Entrepreneurial activities, agriculture, and work were important to the young people, indicating a strong sense of responsibility for contributing to their families and communities. Understanding 4-S members' interests and ideas can serve local leaders in developing activities that reflect members' interests and tap into their strengths.

Key words: children, 4-S clubs, community development, empowerment

Introduction

Latin America as a region has drastically reduced its poverty levels over the last decade (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), & World Food Programme (WFP), 2013); yet in spite of this surge in development, many individual countries in the region still struggle with high rates of poverty (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2015). One such country is Nicaragua, considered one of the poorest countries in the region with 37% of its population suffering from chronic poverty (Vakis, Rigolini, & Lucchetti, 2015).

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To further complicate Nicaragua's struggles, 16% of the country's population, approximately one million people, is malnourished and struggling daily to survive (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2016). The situation is worse for children in Nicaragua; 22% of children under the age of 5 suffer from stunting, more than 30% of children under 18 lack primary education, and 15% of Nicaraguan children must work to support their families (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2013).

To reduce poverty and malnutrition in the population, the government of Nicaragua, along with several development partners, has expanded its poverty reduction interventions to include a focus on the development of leadership and other soft skills, in addition to vocational and technical training (Vakis et al., 2015). This emphasis on enhancing the leadership capacity of the population has also trickled down into youth programming across the country through a revived interest in positive youth development as a tool to combat poverty (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2013; United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

Positive youth development has been linked to increased contributions of youth to the community as well as a reduction in the development of problem behaviors in youth (Jelicic, Bobek, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2008). In addition, positive youth development programs have provided young people with the skills to overcome socioeconomic barriers in achieving their goals (Cooper & Guyn Cooper Research Associates, 2008). An example of such a program in the United States is 4-H youth development program. The four Hs in the name stand for: Head, Heart, Hands, and Health (Neff, 2013). The 4-H program is an international youth development program generally managed as an Extension program in which students learn by doing. Members of 4-H programs can learn about several subjects and become leaders in their communities (National 4-H Council, 2017). Studies have demonstrated significantly higher performance of 4-H members across a plethora of prosocial variables when compared with those who are not part of the 4-H program (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007; Hershberg, DeSouza, Warren, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014; Jelicic et al., 2008).

In Latin America, many countries have replicated the 4-H program under the title 4-S. The four Ss in Spanish are the translation of the four Hs; they stand for Saber (knowledge-head), Sentimiento (feelings-heart), Salud (health), and Servicio (service-hands) (Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), 1997; Rosenberg, 2011). The purpose of 4-S clubs is to strengthen the positive development of members with an emphasis on the following

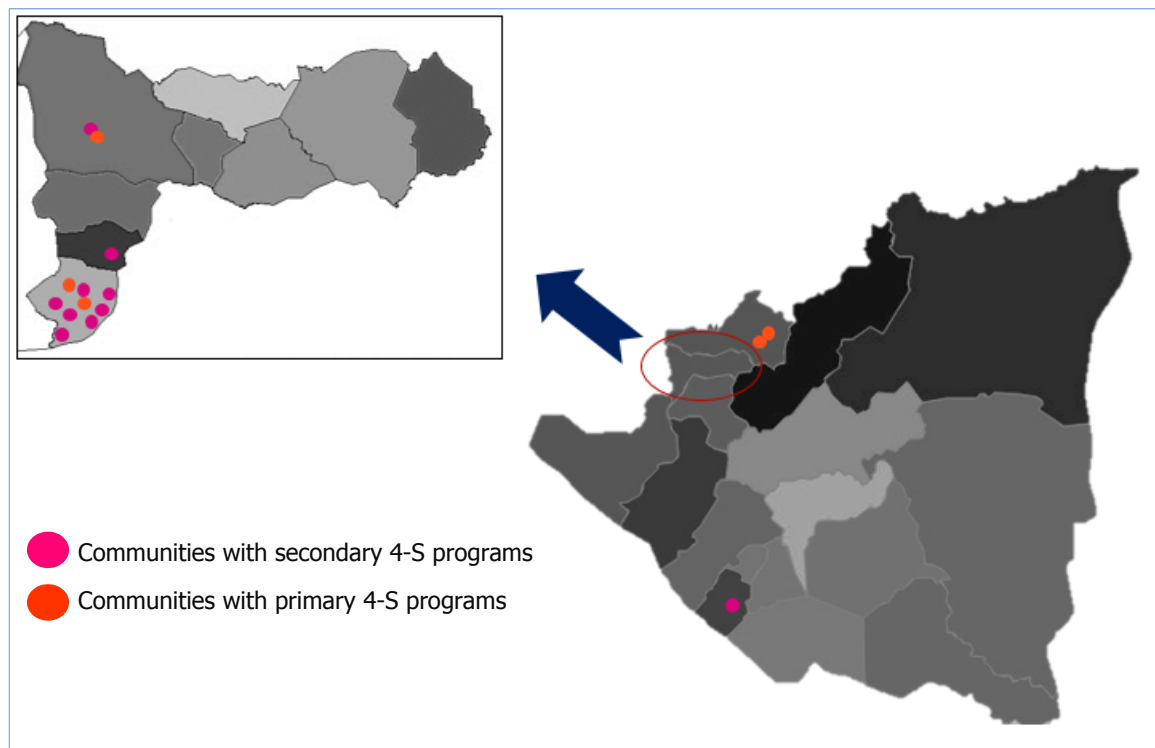
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goals: to increase agricultural production, to raise health and living standards of the members, and to improve the conditions of their families and communities (IICA, 1997).

Background of 4-S in Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, the 4-S program was introduced in the mid-1950s through the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (IICA, 1997). The program flourished for more than 25 years and members were able to participate in national and international 4-S meetings held in Latin America (IICA, 1968). But with the advent of civil unrest in the 1970s and the outbreak of civil war in 1979, the 4-S program was abandoned as the country plunged deeper into crisis. Although efforts were undertaken to reinstitute 4-S in post-war Nicaragua, the country’s peace was still too fragile to support the program, and 4-S disappeared completely in 1993 (IICA, 1997).

Figure 1. 4-S Clubs in Nicaragua, July 2015



After nearly 20 years in dormancy, the idea of reintroducing 4-S clubs in Nicaragua was implemented by Fabretto, an organization dedicated to empowering underserved children and their families through education, nutrition, and economic opportunity (Fabretto, 2015). The organization has a strong presence in northern Nicaragua, a region with especially high rates of

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poverty and malnutrition (FAO, 2010). The impetus for reintroducing 4-S was the renewed interest in positive youth development as a poverty reduction strategy (K. Marinacci, personal communication, August 11, 2016). The first 4-S club organized by Fabretto began in 2012. By 2015, the program had increased to fifteen 4-S clubs for primary and secondary school students (C. Aguirre, personal communication, June 10, 2015) (Figure 1).

As of August 2016, more 4-S clubs had been launched in the eastern part of the country. These clubs are in their initial stages but the club members are already very excited to belong to 4-S. The 4-S clubs in the eastern part of the country are mainly high school programs (K. Marinacci, personal communication, August 11, 2016).

As the 4-S program in Nicaragua is still in its nascent phase, understanding young people's interests in participating in 4-S and how they believe they can help their communities is critical information for 4-S leaders who are running the programs. This information will assist them in understanding how to incorporate learning into activities the children find most interesting and meaningful. There are few studies in Latin America focused on understanding the interests young members have within the 4-S clubs.

Theoretical Framework

This study used the Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Gambone & Connell, 2004) as a theoretical framework. The framework explores the interaction of community conditions with youth development indicators and how these interactions demonstrate opportunity for helping young people to succeed, especially those with significant barriers to success (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). Although there are numerous positive youth development frameworks (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009), the Community Action Framework for Youth Development specifically targets youth who face significant hurdles in achieving positive outcomes, thus making it more appropriate for the contextual realities facing many youth in developing countries. The framework considers the importance of improving young people's lives with respect to economic self-sufficiency, health and social relations, and contributions to the community (Gambone & Connell, 2004). These three outcomes are more likely to be achieved when young people learn to be proactive, learn to have better interpersonal relations, and learn to effectively navigate the challenges of life (Gambone & Connell, 2004).

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Different strategies can be adopted to achieve these outcomes, such as strengthening adults' capacities, reforming institutions that affect children, increasing the number of developmental activities available for youth, and readjusting resources to support youth development initiatives (Gambone & Connell, 2004). The Community Action Framework for Youth Development has been studied in 4-H in the United States with results indicating positive outcomes in improving young people's interpersonal relations and community involvement (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009).

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development is composed of five elements that need to be addressed in order to have the greatest impact on young people's development. This study addresses the element of the framework focused on implementing community strategies to enhance supports and opportunities for youth (Gambone, et al., 2002). This portion of the framework encourages communities to increase the number and quality of developmental activities for youth (Gambone & Connell, 2004). The current study focuses on expanding extracurricular opportunities for young people by exploring which activities 4-S club members value and consider important.

Methods

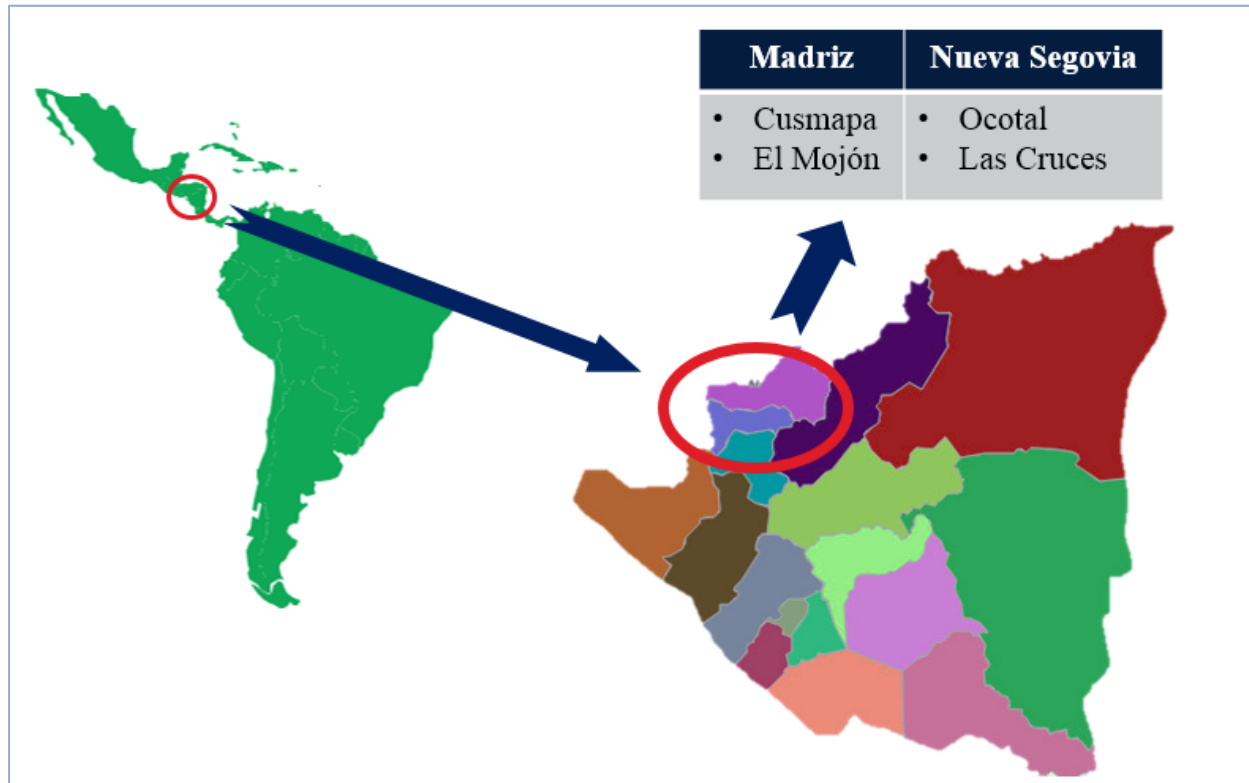
A sentence completion technique was used to collect data in this study after approval from the Institutional Review Board. Often used to assess motivation in consumer research, this technique provides people with an incomplete sentence that they are asked to finish (Frick, Barry, & Kamphaus, 2009). Sentence completion has proven to be a technique that works well with youth from limited resource communities in less developed countries (Raffaelli, Koller, Reppold, Krum, & Bandeira, 2001). In their work with homeless youth in Brazil, Raffaelli and colleagues (2001) found that providing a structure for their young participants helped them to overcome some of the educational limitations these young people face. The sentence completion method helped the youth to focus their thinking and elicited substantive responses more effectively than did open-ended questions (Raffaelli et al., 2001).

As in the study undertaken by Raffaelli and colleagues (2001), this current study sought to uncover the thoughts, feelings, values, and motivations of youth with limited resources. Since the participants in this study were quite young with varying levels of formal education, the sentence completion method was deemed most appropriate for eliciting honest and focused responses. In this study, four sentences were completed by 94 members of 4-S between the

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ages of nine and 13 in four different communities from two departments in northern Nicaragua: Madriz and Nueva Segovia (Figure 2). A department is a defined geographic territory within Nicaragua, similar to a state in the United States.

Figure 2: Area of the Study



Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to understand 4-S club members’ interests and ideas in rural Nicaragua. Questions were focused on young people’s curiosities, hobbies, free time, and social involvement. To accomplish this purpose, the study addressed the following objectives:

1. Determine the activities young people consider most important with respect to four different categories (curiosities, community service, hobbies, and for fun).
2. Compare the young people’s answers with the socio-economic situation of their communities.

Data Collection

To conduct this study, researchers asked permission from the directors of the youth organization implementing 4-S in the communities, the teachers in charge of the clubs, and the parents of the students. Researchers visited the four communities over a 2-week period in 2015 to observe the clubs and administer the sentence completion exercise to the club members who chose to participate. There were some members of the club who did not participate due to absence or lack of interest, but their number did not exceed five. Both researchers are fluent in Spanish, so the data collection and analysis were conducted in Spanish. Researchers then translated the results into English.

Researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants, who were then asked to read four incomplete sentences, think about them, and complete the sentences using their own words (Ballou, 2008). The four incomplete sentences were taken from the Clover Survey, which is used extensively in the *4-H 101* curriculum clubs use to help plan activities (Hutson et al., n.d.). The sentence stems were: (a) I am curious about, (b) We can help our community through, (c) Just for fun we could, and (d) My hobbies are. The sentence completion exercise focuses the participants on the subject of interest, but provides them with the freedom to provide authentic responses reflecting their personal beliefs (Frick et al., 2009).

The young people were assured that no identifying information was requested of them; they were specifically instructed to not put their names or other personal information on their completed worksheets. This ensured anonymity of the respondents.

In Madríz department, the survey was conducted in two different communities, El Mojón and Cusmapa. In El Mojón, 15 members of the 4-S club participated in the study and in Cusmapa 40 young people from two 4-S clubs chose to participate. In the department of Nueva Segovia, two clubs participated in the study. Twenty young people from the city of Ocotal completed the statements and 19 members from the Las Cruces 4-S club participated (Table 1). There were a total of 515 responses to the sentence completion exercise because some respondents completed their sentences with multiple responses.

The departments in which this research was conducted, Madríz and Nueva Segovia, are two of the poorest areas in Nicaragua and have the highest rates of malnutrition in the country (WFP, 2016). In addition to the difficult conditions already confronting residents of these areas, this

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region has suffered from devastating droughts that have seriously hindered agricultural production (IFAD, 2014). Further complicating the situation is the socio-demographic make-up of the region: both Madríz and Nueva Segovia have high concentrations of indigenous groups that have experienced decades of exclusion and disenfranchisement by the government (Hooker, 2005). The group of young people who participated in this study comes mostly from families with indigenous roots who engage in small-scale agriculture to make a living (Instituto Nacional de Información de Desarrollo (INIDE), 2005; 2008a). The difficult realities faced by residents of Madríz and Nueva Segovia require young people to shoulder a significant portion of the responsibilities for ensuring the family's survival by helping their parents in income-generating activities or in domestic duties at home (Federación Coordinadora Nicaragüense de ONG que Trabaja con la Niñez y la Adolescencia (CODENI), 2016).

Table 1. Number of Clubs and Participants from Study Areas

Community	Department	Number of Clubs	Number of Participants
Cusmapa	Madríz	2	40
El Mojón	Madríz	1	15
Las Cruces	Nueva Segovia	1	19
Ocotal	Nueva Segovia	1	20
Total		5	94

Data Analysis

Completed items were coded and grouped in specific categories (Ballou, 2008). Researchers did not predetermine the categories; rather, researchers allowed the categories to emerge from the participants' responses. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine the participants' interests and ideas for helping their communities. Responses then were compared between clubs and related to the socioeconomic situation prevailing in those areas to understand more clearly the impact the context had on the young people's responses.

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Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2010), and authenticity (Cope, 2014) were used as standards of rigor in the research. Credibility was ensured in this study by observing the conditions in which children live and comparing their conditions with their responses. In addition, one of the researchers discussed the results of the analysis with the tutors of the 4-S clubs to verify the findings (Cope, 2014). As a result, triangulation was achieved (Shaw, 2013).

Transferability in this study was addressed by providing a detailed description of the context and the situation (Tracy, 2010). By providing readers with this level of detail, the transference of research results from this context to another is made possible. Dependability was achieved in this study in two different ways. First, an external researcher reviewed the research process and validated the soundness of the results. Second, the results were evaluated by researchers and compared with the socio-economic conditions found in the communities (Shaw, 2013). Confirmability and authenticity were accomplished through a clear explanation of the methodology of data collection and analysis that demonstrate how results were extracted directly from the data (Cope, 2014).

Findings/Results

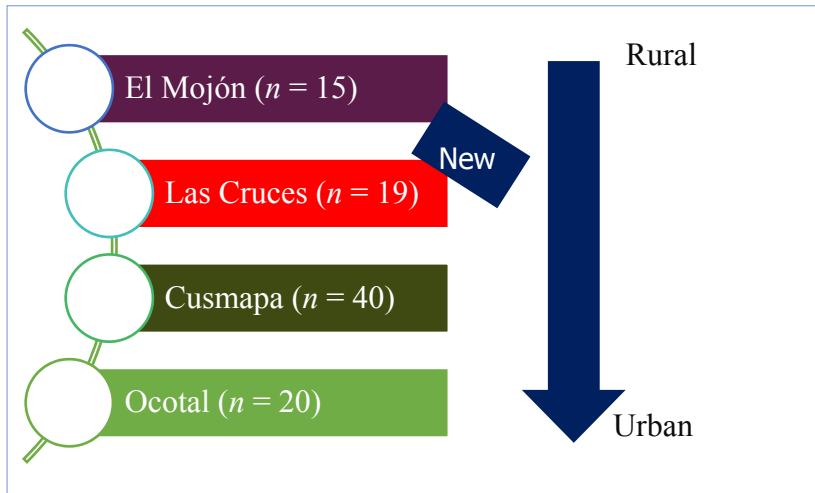
The study results are presented beginning with the most rural area (El Mojón) and ending with the most urban region (Ocotal) (Figure 3). It is important to note that each club differs in its length of time in operation. For example, the club from Las Cruces is a new group, while the club in Cusmapa has been functioning since 2012.

Objective 1

To shed light on club members' interests and ideas, a list of responses was created to determine the activities the young people consider most important with respect to four different categories: curiosities, contribution to their communities, hobbies, and fun activities with their friends. Based on the frequencies and percentages, the responses with the highest scores in the overall groups were:

- I am curious about: entrepreneurial activities, culture and art, and agriculture.
- We can help our community through: recycling, cleaning, and doing social work.
- My hobbies are: playing with friends, working, and culture and art.
- Just for fun we could: do entrepreneurial activities, cultural activities and art, and practicing sports.

Figure 3. 4-S Clubs That Participated in the Study



Objective 2

The second objective, which was to compare the children’s answers with the socioeconomic situation of their communities, was reached by calculating the frequencies of each of the communities in each of the activities. The number of participants in each community was different; therefore, percentages were calculated to better compare the results. The contextual conditions in which these clubs operate are similar; however, there exist some important differences among the communities.

To help put these differences into perspective, El Mojón, located in Madríz department, has a population of around 300 who live in 80 houses (Alcaldía de Totogalpa, n.d.). The community lacks public services such as electricity and potable water. The principal economic activity in El Mojón is agriculture; in total, the community has 46 small-scale farms (Alcaldía de Totogalpa, n.d.). The community boasts of a small elementary school for the local children.

Las Cruces is located in the Nueva Segovia department and has a population of approximately 900 (INIDE, 2008b). Virtually none of the people living in this community has access to electricity while approximately 50% have access to potable water (INIDE, 2008b). Most of the community residents work in small-scale agriculture, and elementary education is available in the community.

Cusmapa has a population of approximately 1,405 inhabitants. As the provincial capital, Cusmapa has better access to basic services such as electricity and water. The principal

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economic activity in Cusmapa is agriculture with more than 700 farmers (INIDE; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAGFOR), 2013).

Ocotal is the capital of the department of Nueva Segovia; this is the largest community that participated in the study with a population (estimated in 2012) of approximately 41,000 inhabitants (INIDE, n.d.). Although there is greater access to basic services in this community, the young people in our study are from the most disadvantaged parts of the city, often bereft of such luxuries.

Sentence Completion Results

I am curious about... Table 2 displays the results from completing the sentence beginning with, "I am curious about." El Mojón and Cusmapa share some curiosities in entrepreneurial activities, culture, and aspirations. In El Mojón, young people expressed interest in *other* cultures; this may be the result of the visits they receive from volunteers from all over the world who go to work on projects there and get involved in the community.

Table 2. Percentage of Responses by Each Community for the Statement: "I am curious about..."

El Mojón (n = 15)	%	Las Cruces (n = 15)	%	Cusmapa (n = 45)	%	Ocotal (n = 25)	%
Entrepreneurial activities	79	Agriculture	36	Entrepreneurial activities	49	Culture	38
Other cultures	16	Culture	27	Aspirations	22	Agriculture	21
Aspirations	5	Learn new games	14	Culture	10	Education	17
Other	0	Other	23	Other	19	Other	24

In addition, both El Mojón and Cusmapa youth shared that they were curious about preparing for the future. Some of them want to be teachers, others want to be good parents, and there were even some answers touching on the pursuit of happiness. The researchers decided to group all of the future-oriented responses into a separate category called aspirations. Therefore, the dreams and ideas the young people have for their future are all considered as aspirations.

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Las Cruces and Ocotal also shared an interest in culture; most of the young people are highly interested in dancing and singing. Some students also expressed interest in drawing and painting. The young people from Las Cruces and Ocotal have a strong interest in agriculture; they want to learn better techniques to improve their production and they want to learn how to plant different crops. In addition, young people from Las Cruces are interested in learning new games, while those from Ocotal are interested in their education (the school of Ocotal is the only one among the four groups sampled with a library). Finally, researchers grouped as “other” some unique curiosities that were not common in the groups such as designing robots and playing video games.

Responses with the highest frequency in all the clubs in the ‘curiosity’ category were related to entrepreneurial activities, such as making and selling artisanal handiwork. It is important to note that these young people receive support from different groups such as 4-S to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The young people see this as a way to learn something new, spend time with their friends, and save money for when it is needed. Cultural identity was also considered very important because most of the children come from indigenous roots. As a result, activities such as dancing, singing, cooking, and drawing were popular. Young people also expressed an interest in learning more about agriculture, as this is the principal economic activity in this region and most of the families of the young people who participated in the study work in agriculture.

We could help our community by... Table 3 shows the activities the young people consider important for helping their community. Most of the club members consider it important to work on environmental issues. Activities such as recycling, reforestation and picking up litter were mentioned. Participating in social work, such as helping the elderly and the ill, was also considered an important activity for the community because the communities do not have any type of services for them. In Las Cruces young people believed that helping their church and raising money for different community initiatives were the most important ways they could serve their community. Young people in Las Cruces were very committed to helping their community through their church. Religion is a strong element in the lives of Las Cruces residents.

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Table 3. Percentage of Responses by Each Community for the Statement: “We could help our community by...”

El Mojón (n = 15)	%	Las Cruces (n = 15)	%	Cusmapa (n = 45)	%	Ocotal (n = 25)	%
Recycling	33	Reforestation	32	Cleaning	36	Recycling	50
Social work	25	Social work	27	Recycling	25	Social work	39
Reforestation	17	Helping in the church	23	Reforestation	15	Cleaning	8
Cleaning	17	Fundraising	14	Social work	15	Other	3
Other	8	Other	4	Other	9		

Participants also expressed their interest in recycling, cleaning and reforestation. This could be because these communities either lack basic sanitation services, or the services are intermittent. The accumulation of garbage and lack of a recycling system are common problems. In some areas the communities experienced flooding because garbage accumulated on the drainage routes.

Young people also consider protecting the environment to be important. This could be because trash is burned or dumped in local rivers, polluting the local area. Also, trees are cut and used for fuel without replanting, jeopardizing the environmental health of the communities. As a result, the young people want to reforest because they know wood is their primary (and in some cases only) fuel source for cooking.

My hobbies are... In the statements about hobbies (Table 4), there was a broad range of responses. Interestingly, work was considered a hobby in all four communities. Most of the young people stated their hobbies as working in agriculture and helping at home. This is interesting because they are between the ages of 9 and 13, so it may seem unusual to see work as a hobby. However, the young people in these areas are used to working to help their families, and they likely see it as a hobby because it is what they do in their free time. Other hobbies they have are group games and sports. The young people in these communities engage regularly in different group activities with their peers, mainly playing traditional games. They enjoy their time with their friends and they are always willing to teach and learn different games. Finally, studying was also considered to be a hobby by the participants. They valued the opportunity to study and looked forward to their academic learning experiences.

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Table 4. Percentage of Responses by Each Community for the Statement: “My hobbies are...”

El Mojón (n = 15)	%	Las Cruces (n = 15)	%	Cusmapa (n = 45)	%	Ocotal (n = 25)	%
Work	64	Group games	41	Group games	24	Work	22
Group games	21	Sports	28	Sports	24	Group games	20
Entrepreneurial activities	7	Work	14	Study	17	Study	18
Study	7	Other	17	Work	12	Sports	16
Other	1			Technology	11	Culture	11
				Other	0	Other	13

El Mojón youth also mentioned entrepreneurial activities as a hobby, which may be a reflection of successful entrepreneurial activities they have implemented in the past. Cusmapa was the only community to list technology as a hobby. Because Cusmapa is a bigger community than El Mojón and Las Cruces, the young people there have access to some luxuries such as TV and computers. This exposure to technology may have piqued their interest in learning more about that topic. Interestingly, though Ocotal is the largest of the four communities in this study, technology was not mentioned as a hobby. Ocotal was the only community that considered culture to be an important hobby and they mentioned participating in cultural activities in their free time. Some of the members from the clubs mentioned dancing to their traditional music, indicating that culture is a strong component of this hobby.

Just for fun we could... The last sentence youth were asked to complete began with, “Just for fun we could” (Table 5). This statement had a wide range of answers; for three of the four communities, culture formed an integral part of their responses, probably due to their indigenous ethnic heritage. Sports, mainly baseball and soccer, and group games also played a prominent role in their responses. Agriculture and entrepreneurial activities were also mentioned, most likely because the young people see a direct economic benefit from these activities, thus making it fun.

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Table 5. Percentage of Responses by Each Community for the Statement: “Just for fun we could...”

El Mojón (n = 15)	%	Las Cruces (n = 15)	%	Cusmapa (n = 45)	%	Ocotal (n = 25)	%
Sports	55	Culture	42	Entrepreneurial activities	48	Agriculture	29
Culture	35	Group games	31	Culture	14	Technology	21
Group games	10	Work	8	Aspirations	14	Group games	21
Other	0	Education	8	Sports	9	Sports	14
		Other	1	Education	7	Aspirations	11
				Group games	7	Other	4
				Other	1		

An interesting component of the agriculture and entrepreneurial activities is the collaborative nature of these ventures. The young people expressed a zeal for creating things they can sell. Many of these entrepreneurial activities are done as a group with other young people providing an opportunity to socialize as well as generate income that is shared among group members. Residents in these communities have strong ties to their neighbors and fellow community members, and a culture of collaborative caring for each other is evident. The young people in these communities mirror those communal values by engaging in entrepreneurial activities together, creating a space for both having fun and generating income.

Dreaming of a better future was also something considered to be fun for these young people. Due to their focus on improving themselves, education was also considered an activity that they do for fun. Interestingly, in Ocotal, the most urbanized community in the study, the young people mentioned technology as a way to have fun. They mentioned computers, video games, and TV as important elements for having fun in Ocotal.

Finally, it is important to see the effect that the environment has on each club. The young participants completed their sentences based on the access they have to activities and education. Therefore, as we could see in some of the results of Objective 2, the most rural communities had more homogeneous responses and the activities they wrote do not require a lot of resources. But as the community size increased, the children’s responses became more heterogeneous with more elements integrated into the responses. For example, young people

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from El Mojón never thought about technology as a hobby, but responses from Ocotal and Cusmapa involved technology because they have better access to technology since they have electricity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to understand 4-S club members' interests and ideas in rural Nicaragua. Questions were focused on young people's curiosities, hobbies, free time, and social involvement. To accomplish this purpose, the study addressed the following objectives: (a) determine the activities young people consider most important with respect to four different categories (curiosities, social service, hobbies, and for fun) and (b) compare the young people's answers with the socio-economic situation of their communities.

Young people from the 4-S clubs in northern Nicaragua expressed similar interests and ideas regarding their participation in 4-S and in helping their communities. Their responses reflect the realities of their daily lives. Although the responses have many similarities, they differ slightly based on the socioeconomic conditions in which the young people live. For example, the club members in Ocotal showed more diversity in their responses; they have more resources available to them, which provide them with different types of experiences. On the other hand, the young people from El Mojón live in a small community with extremely limited resources that do not provide them much variety in terms of experiences.

Entrepreneurial activities, agriculture, and work—farming, doing laundry, cleaning the house, and helping relatives—were extremely important to the young people because they feel responsible for contributing to their families. They know that with the entrepreneurial activities they can earn the money to help their families and communities. In addition to helping their families, the young people also save some of the money earned through their entrepreneurial activities. This money is then used when a club member has an emergency of any kind.

In addition, celebration of culture was important because the young people who participated in our study have a strong indigenous heritage. They believe in the importance of maintaining their culture; learning traditional dances and performing them together was important for them.

The young people in our study also showed a real concern for the preservation of the environment. They communicated an awareness of how important reforestation is to their

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future and expressed a desire to ensure that the forests surrounding their communities stay healthy.

This study shows that young people are keenly aware of their contextual conditions and engage in a plethora of activities that contribute to their families and their communities. While engaging in play was also an integral part of these young people's lives, it was interesting to see how activities surrounding income generation and entrepreneurship were considered to be play. Perhaps even more interesting is that the participants in our study were all under the age of 14, and even at their relatively young ages they recognized the problems of the community and tried to find activities to address these problems, such as reforestation and recycling.

The fact that children recognized some weaknesses of their communities is a good start to address those weaknesses and improve the community. Each of the sentences the young people completed in this study really identified a need or a problem they were facing in their communities. According to Minkler (2005), the identification of a problem or need is necessary to plan meaningful activities, achieve common goals, and address the identified area of weakness.

In addition, the young people's desire to learn new things and participate in income-generating activities demonstrates an eagerness to be involved in resolving the areas of weakness in their communities. Groups such as 4-S can serve as a source of empowerment to young people in addressing issues in their communities, while at the same time creating capacity in the community through the engagement of young people in solving community problems (Minkler, 2005).

Young people need to have spaces to perform activities they consider valuable to help maintain motivation levels and ensure the continuity of creative activities (Brophy, 2013). Creating spaces, such as the 4-S clubs, in which young people can be engaged in their communities, express their creativity, and feel empowered, is an important, but often overlooked, piece of community development (Hastings, Barrett, Barbuto, & Bell, 2011). The young people who participated in our study have already engaged in different activities in their communities and they have received a lot of support from the adults. Parents of the young people and other community members are excited that these young people have the opportunity to learn something different; in fact, the adults often engage in the activities along with the young people. This is a unique opportunity to reach out to adults and create opportunities for them to

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develop new skills or reinforce existing skills, further enhancing the capacities of the community.

Several studies regarding youth development programs underscore the importance of having these programs; the benefits members, teachers, and family find in them (Grégoire, 2004); and the impact 4-H programs have on the five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) (Lerner et al., 2005; Phelps et al., 2009). Members of the program value the positive impact the 4-H program had on their lives (Grégoire, 2004). Latin America has few studies related to 4-S. A study developed in Costa Rica with 4-S clubs concludes that the program provides opportunities for collective and constructive learning and is a path to boost leadership through the country (Lopes, 2013).

Understanding 4-S members' interests and ideas can serve local 4-S leaders as they seek to crystallize group norms and activities of the fledgling 4-S program in Nicaragua. Youth development programs, such as 4-S, are key for developing shared interests and creating a connection between the families and communities (National Research Council, 2002). Having youth programs geared toward the attainment of positive goals can facilitate the development of future adults with greater economic stability, as well as personal and professional satisfaction (Pittman, 2003).

The responses in this study need to be considered so as to better inform community strategies to enhance opportunities for youth and children (Gambone et al., 2002). The leaders of these different clubs develop projects and programs based on the socioeconomic needs of the area and students (Krapp, 2005). Taking the club members' perspectives into consideration could lead to the development of more meaningful activities for the clubs. Clubs with diverse opportunities will foster youth development and interests (National Research Council, 2002). By incorporating valuable lessons into activities that are important to the young people, club leaders will likely find a higher level of commitment and satisfaction among club members.

The 4-S program in Nicaragua also needs to provide members with a basic understanding of adequate nutrition, health, and supportive relationships, by developing activities where they can learn by doing in a safe space (Lerner et al., 2016). 4-S can provide supportive relationships with other young members and adults, and it provides opportunity of learning in a safe environment. The 4-S program does not have all these characteristics by itself; children who participate in the clubs receive additional support from Fabretto, which covers the components of nutrition, health and safety.

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The Community Action Framework also states the importance of having several stakeholders involved in youth development. The 4-S program can invite experts in the topics of interest to motivate youth and to provide them with an inside view (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2001). Monitoring and evaluating the results that programs such as 4-S have on young people is essential for taking future steps in youth development in this region (Gambone et al., 2002). Therefore, future studies need to involve targeted monitoring of these programs.

Future research on this topic could include a replication of this study with other 4-S clubs in Nicaragua to see how the responses might change according to age and location. It would also be interesting to create 4-S activities for the youth based on their expressed interests. In addition, conducting a comparative study between a sample from Nicaragua and from the United States and other regions would provide interesting data about regional and national differences and similarities in interests. Because the contextual conditions in Nicaragua appear to drive much of the interests and ideas expressed by the 4-S members who participated in this study, it would be interesting to see how the conditions in which young people in the United States and other regions live affect their responses.

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