



Desk study on aid and democracy

Nicaragua

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This study is part of a series of country-focused desk studies on aid and democracy prepared under the project [The state and statebuilding in the Global South](#). They are prepared under the guidance of Rachel M. Gisselquist as background to a broader research effort on aid, governance, and democracy promotion. The studies follow a common template and each draws on the research literature and selected cross-national sources to discuss regime type and timeline, findings from the literature on democracy/democratization, findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization, aid flows and sources, and specific aid examples. This study addresses the case of Nicaragua, with focus on the post-Cold War period.

Key words: democracy, aid flows, Latin America

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Contents

1	Regime type and timeline.....	2
2	Insights from democracy literature.....	4
	Timeline.....	4
	Origins of democracy/democratization.....	4
	Stages of transition.....	5
	Gaps in literature.....	6
3	Insights from aid and democracy literature.....	6
	Role of aid in Nicaraguan democracy.....	6
	Aid and key political actors.....	7
	Gaps in the literature.....	8
4	Aid flows and sources.....	8
	Available data.....	8
	Nicaragua's aid flows.....	8
	Key priorities of donors.....	10
	Gaps in empirics and literature.....	11
	References.....	12

1 Regime type and timeline

Nicaragua currently ranks 174th out of the 179 countries in the Liberal Democracy Index (Papada et al. 2023). The index, which aims to measure the extent to which liberal democracy is achieved, ranks Nicaragua as one of the worst performers alongside countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and North Korea. The Regimes of the World typology (Lührmann et al. 2018) qualifies the country as an ‘Electoral Autocracy’ which implies that multiparty elections for executive offices exist, but there are insufficient levels of fundamental requisites such as freedom of expression and association, free and fair elections. Nicaragua’s score of 0.18 on the Electoral Democracy Index is telling of its democratic deterioration. Additionally, the Democracy Index 2022 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2022) classifies Nicaragua as an ‘authoritarian’ regime. The table below summarizes how Nicaragua performs on the major democracy and freedom indices.

Table 1: Nicaragua’s performance in democracy and freedom indices

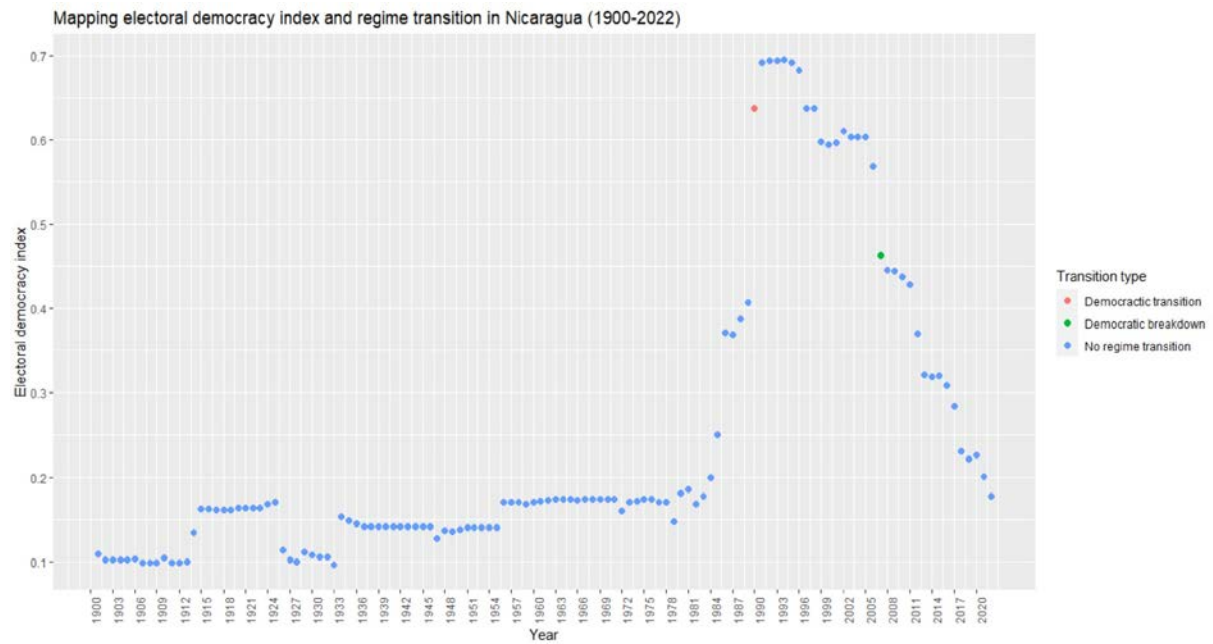
Country	Nicaragua
Liberal Democracy Index	0.03 (in 2022)
Electoral Democracy Index	0.18 (in 2022)
Regimes of the World typology	Electoral Autocracy
Democracy Index, EUI	Authoritarian
Global Freedom Score	23/100 – Not free (in 2022)

Source: author’s compilation based on the indices listed the first column.

Sources note that the democratic deterioration, at least in the recent years, has been evident since the election of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega in 2006. His subsequent tenure was marked by consolidation of all branches of government by the ruling party, the crackdown on fundamental freedoms, and rampant corruption in public offices (Freedom House 2023).

While it may be tempting to attribute Nicaragua’s declining democratic indicators solely to the 2006 elections, it is also crucial to note the historical precedents. Based on the Episodes of Regime Transition or ERT dataset (Maerz et al. 2023), the *general elections of 1990 and 2006* are viewed as the turning points for Nicaraguan democracy.

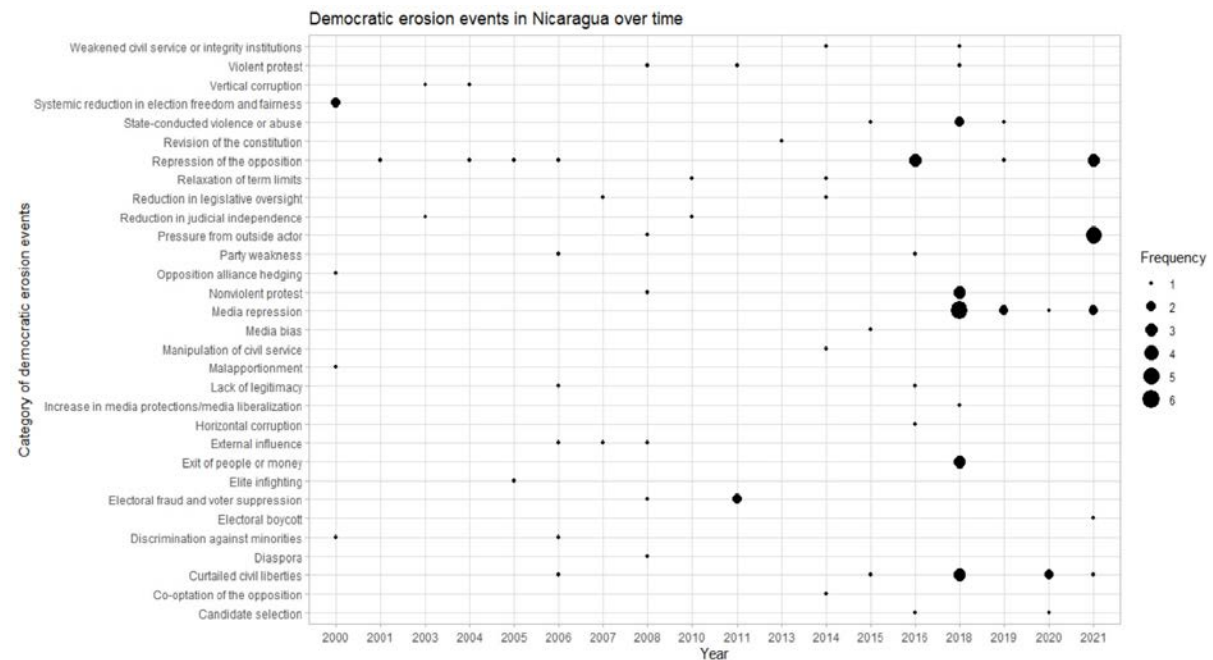
Figure 1: Episodes of regime transformation in Nicaragua



Source: author's construction based on ERT.

According to the ERT, as shown above, the 1990 elections are labelled as a 'democratic transition' and the 2006 elections as 'democratic breakdown'. If this is compared against the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset or DEED (Democratic Erosion Consortium 2023) below, which captures discrete events related to democratic erosion and autocratic consolidation, a clear increase in erosion events from 2006 is visible.

Figure 2: Episodes of democratic erosion in Nicaragua



Source: author's construction based on DEED.

From the DEED visual, it is evident that both the frequency and range of erosion events grew since the 2006 elections. Specifically, 2018 witnessed a sharp rise in the number of incidents including reports of curtailed civil liberties, exit of people/money, media repression, and state-conducted violence. It must

be noted that since the dataset records events starting 2000, it is not possible to validate the extent of erosion events before/during/after the 1990 general elections.

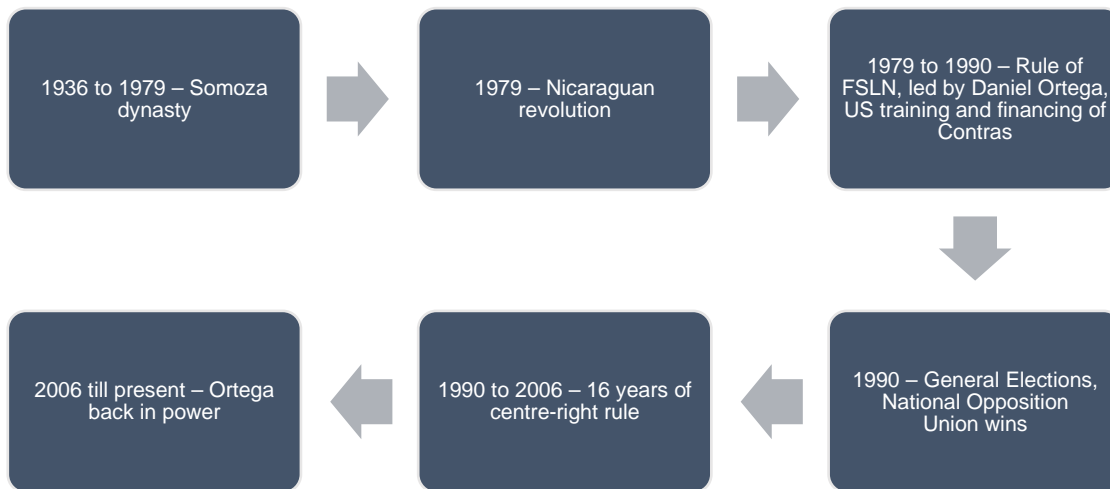
Before delving further into the dynamics of democracy and aid in Nicaragua, it is crucial to briefly understand the country's political system. Nicaragua is a Presidential Republic with a multi-party system (U.S. Department of State 2017). The President is considered the head of the government and is elected by a plurality vote for a 5-year term. The country's (unicameral) National Assembly is its main legislative body. The Assembly consists of 90 deputies elected from party lists drawn at the department and national level, in addition to the outgoing president and the runner-up in the presidential race, making a total of 92 seats (U.S. Department of State 2017). The Supreme Court leads the judicial system, and the Supreme Electoral Council is responsible for organizing and holding elections. The main political parties are the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), led by current President Daniel Ortega, the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), the Conservative Party (PC), National Resistance Party (PRN), and Camino Cristiano (U.S. Department of State 2017).

2 Insights from democracy literature

While the datasets indicate elections in 1990 and 2006 as pivotal years for regime change/transition, the democratization process itself has a broader history.

Timeline

Figure 3: Timeline of major democratic events in Nicaragua



Source: author's construction.

Origins of democracy/democratization

According to several studies on democratization in Nicaragua, the revolution in July 1979 (Jonas and Stein 1990; Martí i Puig 2010) marked a pivotal moment in the country's history. The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), a guerrilla organization founded in 1961, came to power. Following the insurrection, several state institutions, such as the presidential and legislative competitive elections, and the legislative bodies came under the FSLN's control. Martí i Puig (2010) notes that during this phase, the political system was progressively characterized as a 'fusion of the state with the party'. The party exhibited classic characteristics of a Marxist-Leninist group and provided little autonomy to its local leaders. The author notes that three factors pushed the FSLN towards a vertical and centralized decision-making system: a) the presence of an undisputed leadership, called the Dirección Nacional (DN), b) a party apparatus with a reduced number of militants, and c) the existence of many social

organizations including the so-called Organizaciones de Masas (OM), which were organically linked to the party.

This interpretation contradicts what scholars like Luckham (1998) perceived. Luckham notes that democracy in both popular and liberal forms emerged from a 'prolonged armed struggle against the US-backed Somoza dictatorship' and that this had contradictory implications for the construction of popular democracy. He adds that the FSLN's 'military vanguardism' sometimes made it unresponsive to the broader demands and sectors. Yet, the party also enjoyed real legitimacy and mass support. He adds that 'political pluralism was implicit in the counter-hegemonic strategy of the revolution' and that the FSLN never made itself the 'sole institutional expression of popular democracy'.

As Jonas and Stein (1990) note, these varying interpretations can be explained by the party's internal dynamics. The FSLN had come to power through a policy of cross-class alliances. It was a coalition of political forces (including both Marxists and social democrats), rather than one unified party. In an attempt to maintain a balance between opposing class interests, contradictory policies were implemented. The party's internal politics were further complicated by the US-backed Contra war and far-reaching American influence in the country's politics. Despite the party's internal differences, they regarded elections 'not [as] a concession but rather [as] a way to strengthen the revolution'. This is further explained in a nuanced manner by Katherine Hoyt (1997) in her book *The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy*. As Brown's (2003: 107) notes: 'She recognizes three phases of Sandinista thinking on representative democracy, beginning with the "rejection of 'bourgeois' elections," in which the FSLN saw itself as a Leninist-style vanguard party[...] this was followed by an "acceptance of elections as tactical," enabling the FSLN to incorporate the loyal opposition into the government and legitimize its rule abroad. Ultimately, with the 1984 elections and the writing of the 1987 constitution, the FSLN embraced "elections in principle," an attitude confirmed by their peaceful cession of power after losing the 1990 elections—an event unprecedented in Nicaraguan history'.

Stages of transition

The first main transition came through Nicaragua's elections in 1990 where the FSLN's Daniel Ortega lost power to the National Opposition Union (or UNO in Spanish) party's Violeta Chamorro. In the immediate aftermath, speculations emerged on what this meant for Nicaraguan democracy. As Williams (1990) noted in the immediate aftermath: 'Progress towards liberal democracy in Nicaragua will depend on a number of factors such as: (1) the emergence of a consensus based on the mutual accommodation of elite interests; (2) the ability of political elites to ensure that their supporters accept the new consensus; and, finally, (3) a US policy that supports such a consensus'. He went on to argue that, paradoxically, establishing and maintaining liberal democracy may block progress toward the construction of popular democracy in the country. This is because liberal democracy tends to solidify the political and economic status quo, thereby limiting the opportunities for meaningful participation. Retrospectively, none of these factors meaningfully emerged in the Nicaraguan context, which explains (at least in part) the current realities.

Following 1990, the next major transition in 2006. After 16 years of conservative government, Daniel Ortega of FSLN was voted into power. As Anderson and Dodd (2009) note, since taking office in 2007, Ortega has proven to be an 'enigmatic politician, part national political leader, part populist demagogue and party strongman, part autocratic *caudillo*'.¹ They add that, politically, Ortega walked a tightrope between the two forms of government (democracy and autocracy) and that he tolerated the democratic system and its institutions, while seeking to acquire as much power as possible. Over the years, his autocratic tendencies have come to the forefront. From appointing his wife as the Vice President to

¹ Caudillo (from Latin *capitellum*, meaning 'head') is a term specifically used in the context of Latin American politics. It refers to strongmen leaders with imposing personalities who use a range of strategic and popular methods to entrench their hegemony and control over power (see Beezley 1969).

detaining opposition leaders and heavily cracking down on anti-government protesters, Ortega has provoked rising discontent both domestically and internationally.

Stuenkel (2021) attributes this 'backslide' to two factors. A) Ortega is aware that he has become so unpopular and thus holding a partly free election would be too risky. This rationalizes his crackdown on democratic freedoms and rights. B) Ortega felt strong enough to imprison the most threatening opposition candidates and organize a controversial election victory to retain power.

Gaps in literature

While there is rich literature on the nature, meaning, and nuances of democratic transition following the revolution in Nicaragua, the following gaps persist:

- The literature typically marks 'events' as the points of transition but largely misses the policies implemented in the previous periods which directly influence a transition event's outcome. Greater emphasis on the 'lead-up' phase would allow for a more nuanced analysis which goes beyond the Nicaraguan revolution and the general elections.
- Most of the 'transitions' are centred around 'elections' within the scholarship. Given the growing scope of democracy literature, other markers can be further explored.
- The analysis is mostly descriptive and in retrospect when it comes to identifying 'transition points' in Nicaraguan politics. Perhaps more objective techniques, based on certain thresholds, can be explored to better determine pivotal events.

3 Insights from aid and democracy literature

Role of aid in Nicaraguan democracy

Foreign aid has played a pivotal role in Nicaraguan democracy. The US was deeply involved in the major political, economic, and military events taking place in the country. Records show the US providing economic aid totalling \$78 million to the Somoza administration until 1977, in addition to providing extensive military assistance which included direct training of the National Guard. To date, the US Government has reportedly 'officially' provided approximately \$2.5 billion in development assistance to Nicaragua, mainly through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID 2023a).

As Scott and Carter (2016) note, foreign aid, and more specifically democracy aid, is a flexible foreign policy tool for the US in Latin America. While USAID (2023b)—which administers most US democracy assistance—claims that democracy assistance targets the rule of law and human rights, competitive elections and political processes, civil society, and accountable governance, it is often used as a tool to respond to global events and pursue foreign policy interests. The strategic usage of democracy aid as a tool, however, is not always straightforward. Scholars noted that US democracy assistance to Latin American, driven by external pressures, followed specific patterns and strategies in each of the three historical phases: Cold War, Post Cold War, and Post 9/11 (Scott and Carter 2016).

Anderson and Park (2018) note that while the US government under Ronald Reagan was hostile to the Sandinistas, parts of the American society felt differently. Individuals, NGOs, and church groups involved themselves as donors to many groups in Nicaragua. Numerous US cities directly supported Nicaraguan towns and cities. Several Western European countries also engaged with the Nicaraguan Revolution through bilateral aid, unlike the US. This international support, which has grown over the years, was not only directed at the state level, but also the local municipal level (Anderson and Park 2016). However, this did not stop the US government from directing foreign aid to the Nicaraguan Contras with the intention of: (i) serving the elite of the region, (ii) intruding into the details of

development strategy with a neoliberal bias; and (iii) wasting the resources placed under the control of weak governments (Wiegersma et al. 2000).

Another donor that emerged as significant for providing 'non-democratic aid' to Nicaragua is Venezuela. Given Ortega's historically close ties with the late Hugo Chavez (Financial Times 2007), Ortega reportedly received 'millions of dollars in discretionary aid from Venezuela funnelled directly into the president's office to be used at presidential discretion' (Anderson and Park 2016). The aid figures are strictly confidential and reportedly provided with the sole intention of keeping Ortega in power (Anderson and Park 2016). Other non-traditional donors like China and Russia are also increasingly gaining prominence.

Foreign aid, clearly driven by these varying donor interests, have introduced downstream inefficiencies in implementation of projects in Nicaragua. As Chahim and Prakash (2014) note, given the nature of aid, 'advocacy' in Nicaragua has become practically synonymous with professionalized lobbying. Additionally, NGOs are mainly focused on pleasing donors and merely reproducing a façade of democracy.

Aid and key political actors

Each phase of Nicaraguan politics saw a different relationship with foreign aid. Under the Somoza period from 1972 to 1979, social spending was low, and the repressive apparatus made use of clientelist ties with social leaders (Borchgrevink 2006). Somoza's government relied on external aid to finance social spending, with aid actors such as USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank, and international NGOs implementing social programmes. In the Sandinista Revolution period (1979–80), wealth redistribution was prioritized, and social sector spending went up from 18% in the Somoza period to 65% of GDP in 1985 (Carrión 2017). However, as public expenditures rose more quickly than expected, coupled with falling exports and inflation, an economic and social crisis emerged. This was exacerbated by contradictory policies of granting land to state enterprises at the cost of individual peasants. In the light of the war against the Contra rebels, an unsustainable situation emerged by the end of 1980s. A ceasefire and peace agreement were signed, with elections scheduled for early 1990 (Carrión 2017).

During the Chamorro, Alemán, and Bolaños administrations between 1990 and 2006, IMF and World Bank stabilization programmes were implemented. They emphasized austerity and debt repayment at the cost of social programmes, leading to rising unemployment. Overall international aid reduced between 1992 and 2006 with only one notable peak for the disaster response of the 1999 Hurricane Mitch (Carrión 2017).

Critics in this period (Tyroler 1990) claimed that aid, especially from the USAID, had deeper political undercurrents. It was thought that USAID sought the reversal of policies carried out by the Sandinista government in favour of a 'social market economy' which includes privatization, fiscal austerity, deregulation, and liberalization and supports the Chamorro UNO government.

Since Daniel Ortega's re-election in 2006, the aid landscape has been increasingly dominated by non-traditional donors. Several traditional bilateral donors (such as the agencies from the UK, Germany, and Finland) terminated their operations and left the country. This departure is attributed to political tensions between the state and donors, shifting aid priorities at the global level, shrinking resources, and Nicaragua passing the middle-income country threshold, among several others (Carrión 2017). This departure of traditional donors has reportedly deeply impacted Nicaraguan civil society and cemented the government's current top-down approach to social participation. Thus, the state-aid relationship has evolved drastically in each period of 'transition', contributing to the present-day scenario.

Gaps in the literature

While several studies capture the politicized nature of aid in the Nicaraguan context, the following knowledge gaps persist:

- There is limited literature on *perception* of aid by Nicaraguan citizens.
- Existing research fails to capture how foreign aid, once received in government coffers, is then used within the country. The sub-national pathways remain largely unclear, making it difficult to understand exactly how aid trickles down within Nicaragua.
- Whether aid from traditional vs non-traditional donors have the same impacts on democracy within Nicaragua remains an empirical question.

4 Aid flows and sources

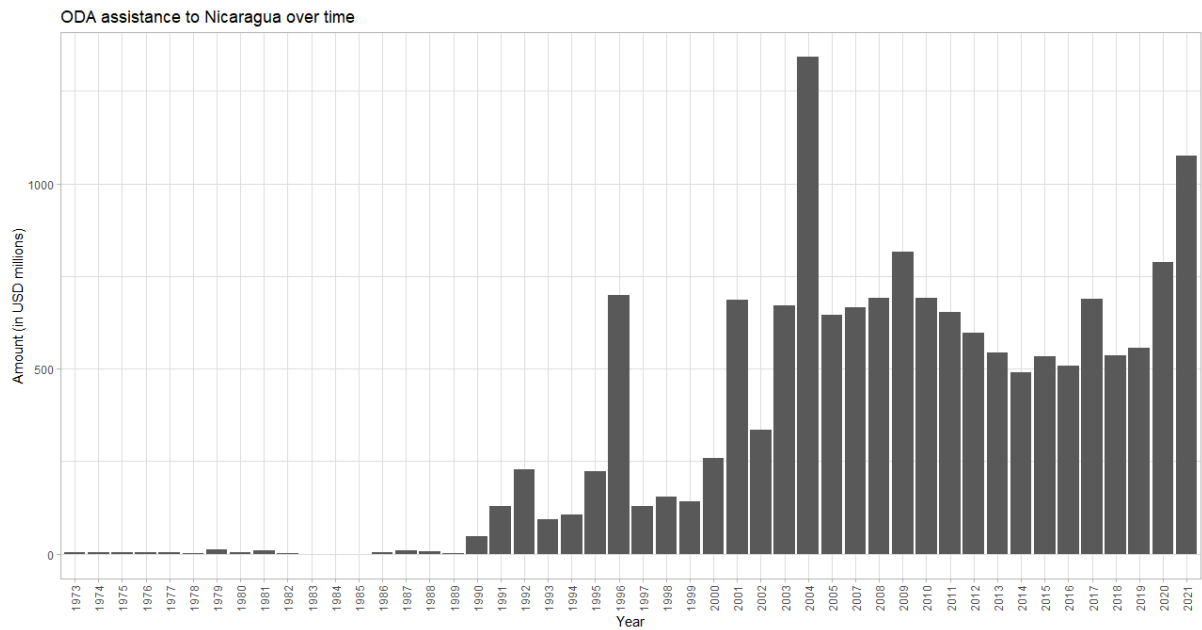
Available data

Detailed data on development assistance to Nicaragua is best captured by the OECD-CRS (Creditor Reporting System) dataset (OECD 2023). The CRS includes data on bilateral and multilateral aid (Official Development Assistance), aid from private sources, and some other resource flows to developing countries. The data are mainly reported by the 30 members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), some international organizations such as multilateral development banks and funds, and select non-DAC members (Atteridge et al. 2019). The other major source is the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). Unlike CRS, it is a voluntary standard, with relatively richer data on activity details including locations, results, and documentation. However, it does not produce absolute aggregate numbers like CRS. World Bank's World Development Indicators also provide relevant data on aid assistance to Nicaragua.

Nicaragua's aid flows

The volume of aid has been increasing since the 1960s. The increase post 1991 could be attributed to the increased support of the US to the Chamorro-led government. Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) peaked in 2004 with a reported \$1.341 billion. As of 2021, the figure stood at \$1.07 billion.

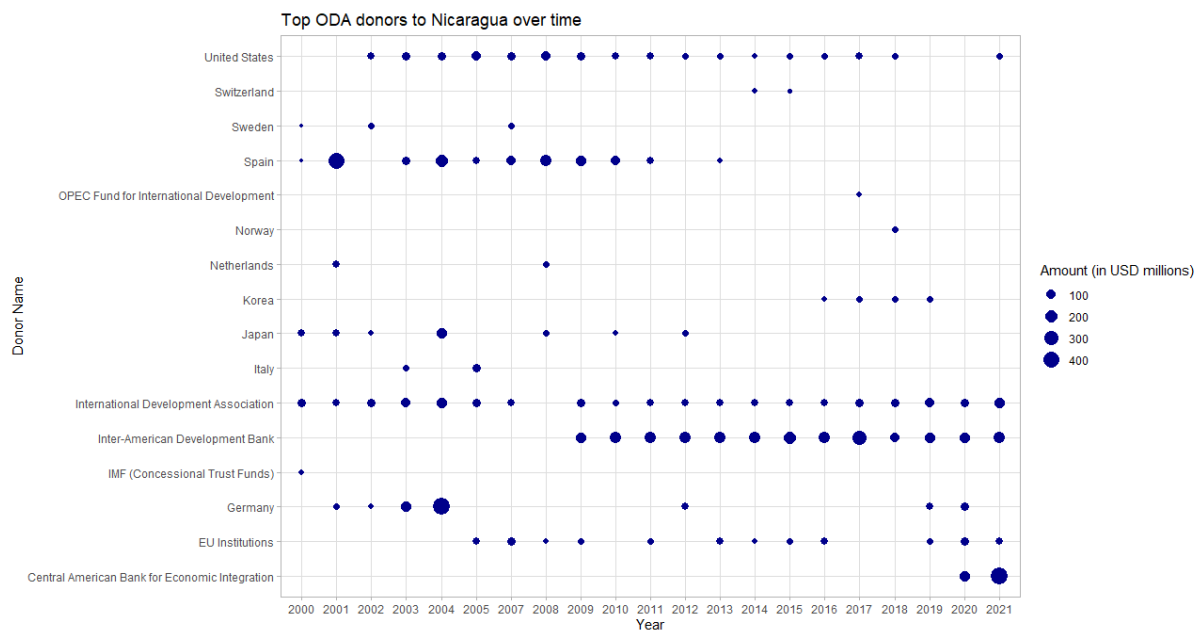
Figure 4: ODA funding volume to Nicaragua over time



Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

It is, however, more complicated to ascertain the top ODA donors in Nicaragua. Given the prominence of non-traditional donors, the lack of systematic data on their contributions, and the obfuscation of development assistance and military aid, the rankings are obscured. From the literature, it is evident that the United States is one of the biggest players. For instance, when development assistance peaked in 2004, USAID recorded a whopping \$19 billion in economic aid and an additional \$6 billion in military aid. This number surpasses the World Bank figure above as USAID uses a more relaxed criteria for what counts as 'economic aid' relative to OECD's ODA definition. Using OECD-CRS, one can map the top-10 donors. However, the ranking may not be truly reflective of donor roles as some donors such as the USA also provide extensive military and non-ODA assistance to Nicaragua, and consequently exert considerable influence.

Figure 5: Top donors to Nicaragua over time

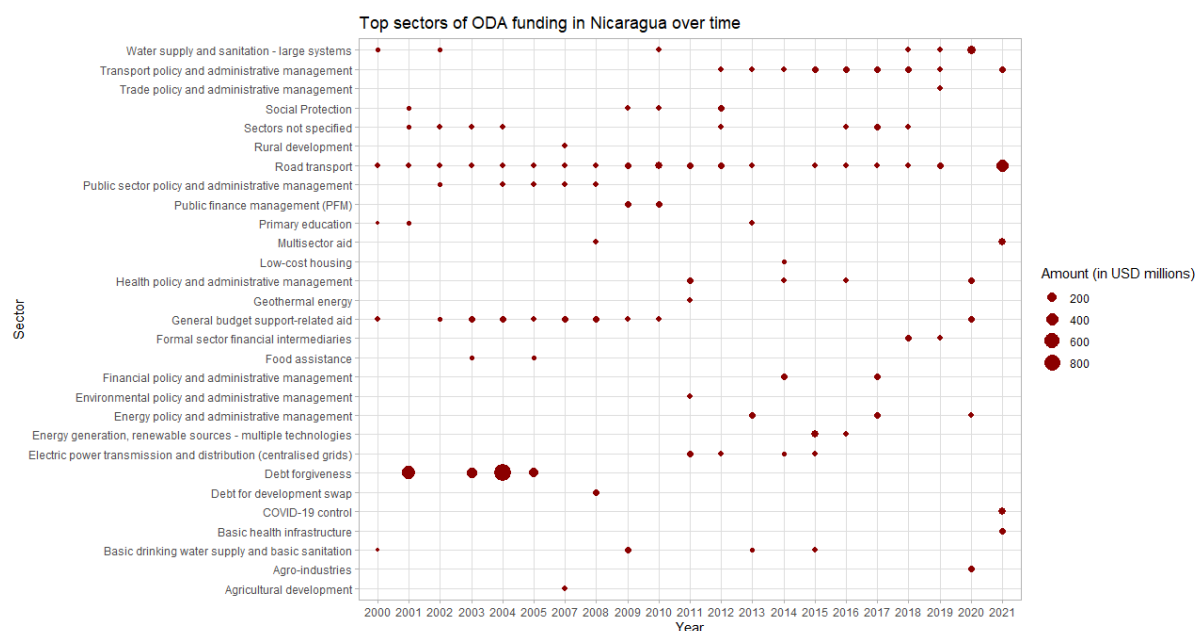


Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

As noted in Figure 5, funding by the Inter-American Development Bank (in which the USA exerts considerable influence) sustains at high levels from 2009. The US and International Development Association (IDA)/World Bank are also influential players, consistently ranking in the top-5 donors from the year 2000. The Central American Bank for Economic Integration has become prominent in the recent years. Donors such as Spain were historically relevant, but their funding volume gradually declines.

In terms of sectoral split (see Figure 6), debt forgiveness was a major component between the years 2000 and 2005. Budget support also remained prominent until 2010. Road transport has been consistently funded as a priority area, with a spike in 2021. Funding has also increased for the allied sector of transport policy since 2012. Sectors such as health and education are sporadically funded as the 'top sectors', but a consistent prioritization in terms of ensuring long-term funding seems to be missing.

Figure 6: Top sectors of funding in Nicaragua over time



Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

When looking at channels of disbursing funding within Nicaragua, interesting insights emerge. Taking the specific case of American aid, projects typically went to the peace and security sector, and overall aid was heavily managed by the Department of Defense. This was emblematic of the blurring lines between military and economic assistance in Nicaragua by the US. However, in recent years, USAID has emerged as the main assistance channel of US aid. For instance, in 2020, \$13.19 billion was provided for peace and security, with USAID emerging as the largest channel for overall aid assistance (USAID and U.S. Department of State 2023). Such a transition could signal a change in the donor's strategy and foreign policy objectives.

Another key donor to consider is Russia. Nicaragua ranks as the fourth largest recipient of Russian aid (Asmus et al. 2018). It is reported that between 2011 to 2015, Nicaragua received nearly \$150 million in ODA from Russia and millions more in military aid (NPR 2016). However, the actual aid volume of Russian aid and its recipients/channels remain largely unknown due to unavailability of data (Asmus et al. 2018).

Key priorities of donors

Under the administration of Daniel Ortega, the donor cooperation landscape has become very polarized. Owing to dissatisfaction with governance and human rights standards, among other reasons,

at least eight traditional donors have phased out bilateral cooperation relationships. Simultaneously, emerging donors such as China, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Uruguay, and Venezuela are increasingly becoming prominent (Walshe Roussel 2013).

International financial institutions, particularly the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), are adapting to this changing donor landscape. The World Bank's assistance to Nicaragua has decreased only by a small margin under the Ortega administration, although the more significant change is its resource mobilization role because of the withdrawal of traditional donors. Conversely, assistance from the IDB has significantly increased under Sandinista rule (Walshe Roussel 2013). Please refer to Figure 1 in Walshe Roussel (2013: 813) for a mapping of how economic, ideological, political, and institutional conditions are influential in donor decision-making and how the changing donor landscape lines up with changes in ownership.

Additionally, the Nicaraguan case offers a unique perspective of donors who reportedly worked directly with the Sandinista mayors at the local level in the 2000s. Around this time, mayors took on considerable foreign donations by establishing direct links with donors outside the national state apparatus. In fact, to ensure that foreign governments would continue to invest in the municipalities, mayors publicly credited donors through billboards. However, post Ortega's re-election, mayoral autonomy was severely diminished, which limited their ability to directly engage donors at the local level (Anderson and Park 2016).

Gaps in empirics and literature

- How donors' priorities have evolved in light of the competing political interests of different donors and the Ortega government requires further systematic study.
- Given that several donors phased out their bilateral ties, little is known about the immediate impacts (economic, political, social) of such a move. Whether other non-traditional donors stepped in to fill the vacuum remains an empirical question.
- How ODA combines with other forms of military and non-aid assistance to drive donor influence in the country's politics and the 'statebuilding project' can be further explored.

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