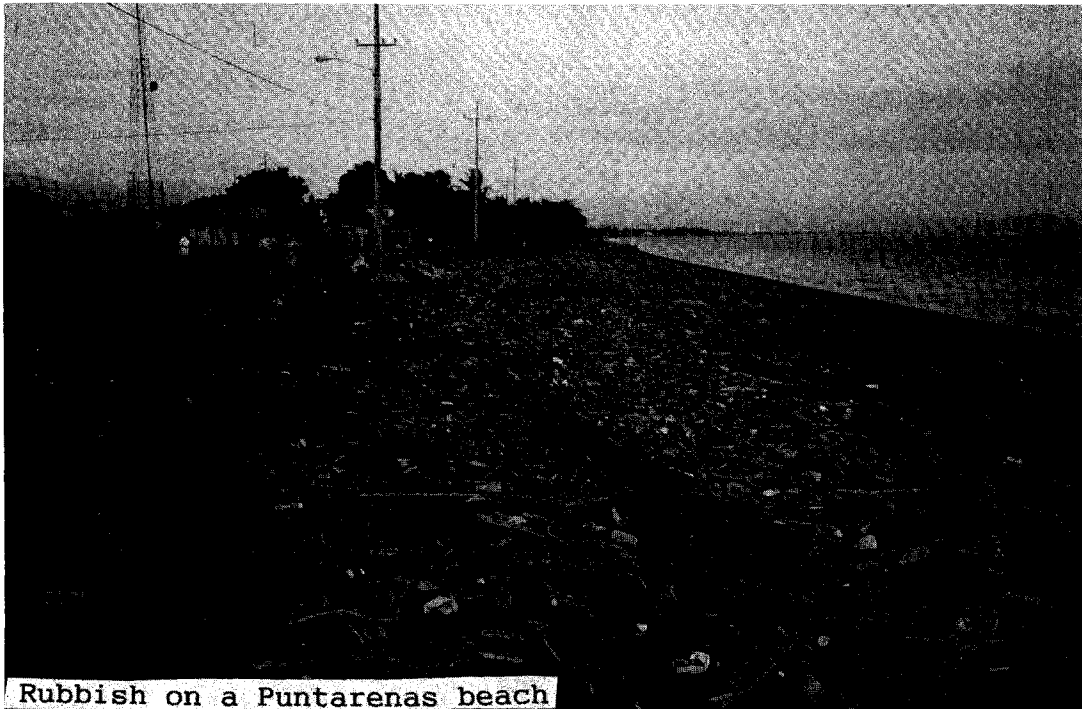


INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

San Jose, February 28, 1994.

Dear Peter,

If you happen to visit the Pacific port city of Puntarenas this summer friendly Ticos that you meet will tell you that many tourists used to come to Puntarenas before, but now few do. Why? What is the problem? Don't waste your precious time asking anybody for answers to these questions. Just walk to the beach in Puntarenas centro. When you reach there no one will tell you the answers that you are looking for, for you shall see them laying on the beach- monton de basura (pile of rubbish). And the problem doesn't end just there.



Rubbish on a Puntarenas beach

Still if you have more time you may want to visit some barrios (neighborhoods) or precarias (slums) where people live. It is not uncommon to see uncollected garbage, some in plastic bags left on house-fronts on streets or just thrown on empty pieces of land between houses in the barrios. In some areas the sewer system don't work and pools of aguas negras (sewage) may be seen, as well as aguas estancadas (stagnant water) because of poor drainage system (which is worse in the rainy season).

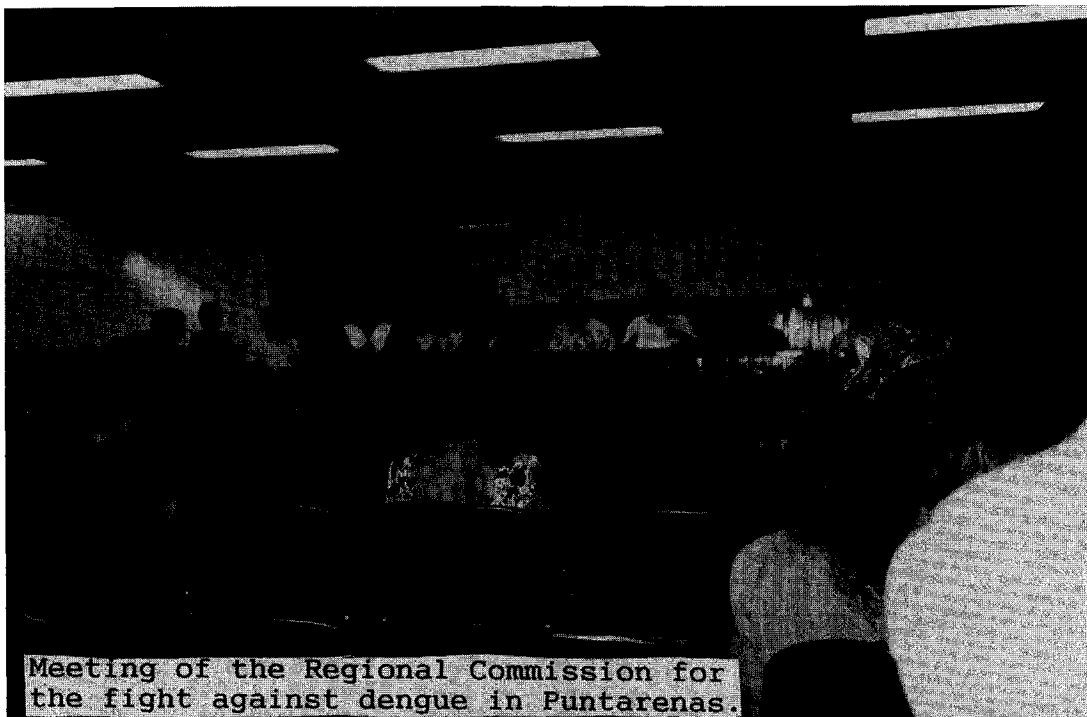
No wonder the tourists are gone and for many a good reason (and in good time too). For instead, a (long forgotten) visitor who had been away from Costa Rica for almost 50 years has come

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

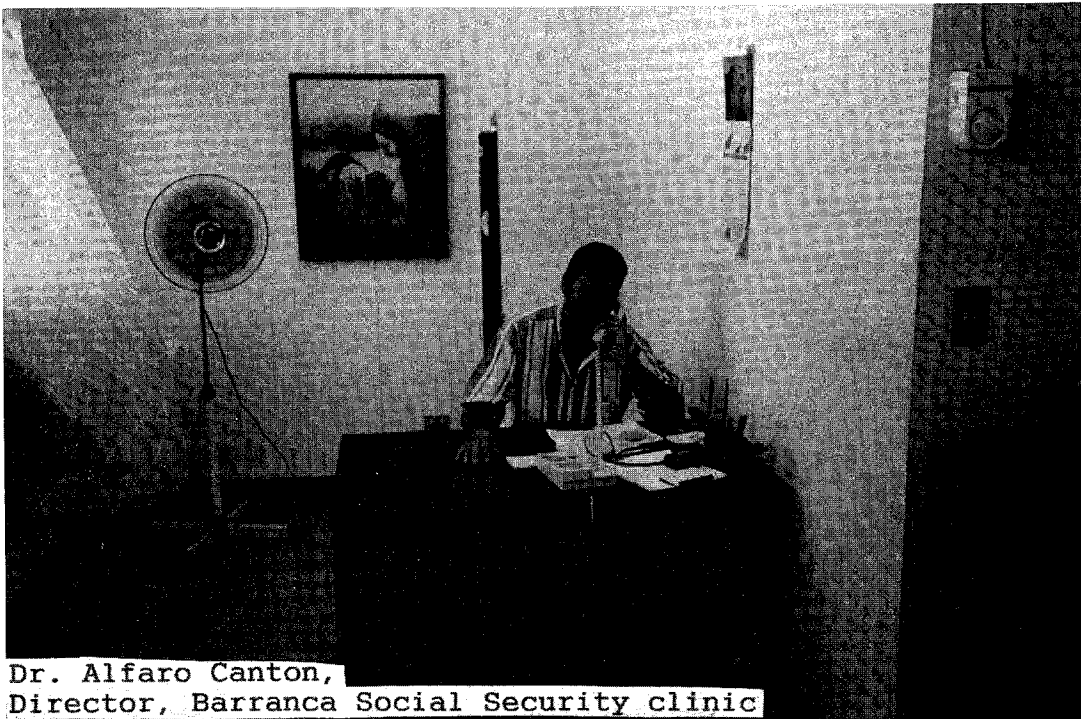
back again- dengue fever!- a viral disease carried by the mosquito *Aedes aegypti* which is happy to breed in stagnant waters. Many Ticos became sick with dengue. The first cases were reported from one barrio known as Carmen Lyra near Barranca in Puntarenas. The disease spread quickly to some neighboring provinces and as far as San Jose. In general, those affected were people living in poor barrios, but mostly the poor in the slums.

The big questions are: couldn't dengue have been avoided in the first place? In as much as personal cleanliness is important to individual health, wasn't being careless about the cleanliness of the physical environment a danger to public health? Didn't responsible authorities know about the potential danger? Or just how much evidence was required by them to take public action- a dengue epidemic?



Nobody wanted to take the blame for dengue, but none could be absolved either. Health workers at the Puntarenas centro de salud (health center run by Ministry of Health-MOH) were pointing an accusing finger at the municipality authority whose job it was to keep a clean environment. The municipality people were unhappy to hear that and so they refused to attend the first meeting on dengue (on November 19, 1993) at Barranca Social Security clinic (Caja) which I attended. Even the regional governor of Puntarenas (who was the special guest of honor) walked out of the meeting because a doctor from the centro de salud had criticized the regional government (under her leadership) for lack of political will to improve living conditions in Puntarenas.

Representatives from the barrios also spoke their minds freely. They revealed a huge gap in the health services provided in communities and that many poor Ticos living in poor barrios and precarias were not covered by any insurance to be able to use the Caja health services. In many barrios (once functioning) health posts stayed shut for one-to-two years and more because doctors had stopped coming to clinics because the MOH had fallen short of financial resources. In some cases health posts had become (literally) living quarters for malaria workers who (I am told) had stopped killing disease-carrying mosquitos because they had not been paid their wages since last July. (The MOH health post in Barranca is a case in point. I had visited it with Dr Alfaro Canton, director of the Caja clinic in Barranca.)



Dr. Alfaro Canton,
Director, Barranca Social Security clinic

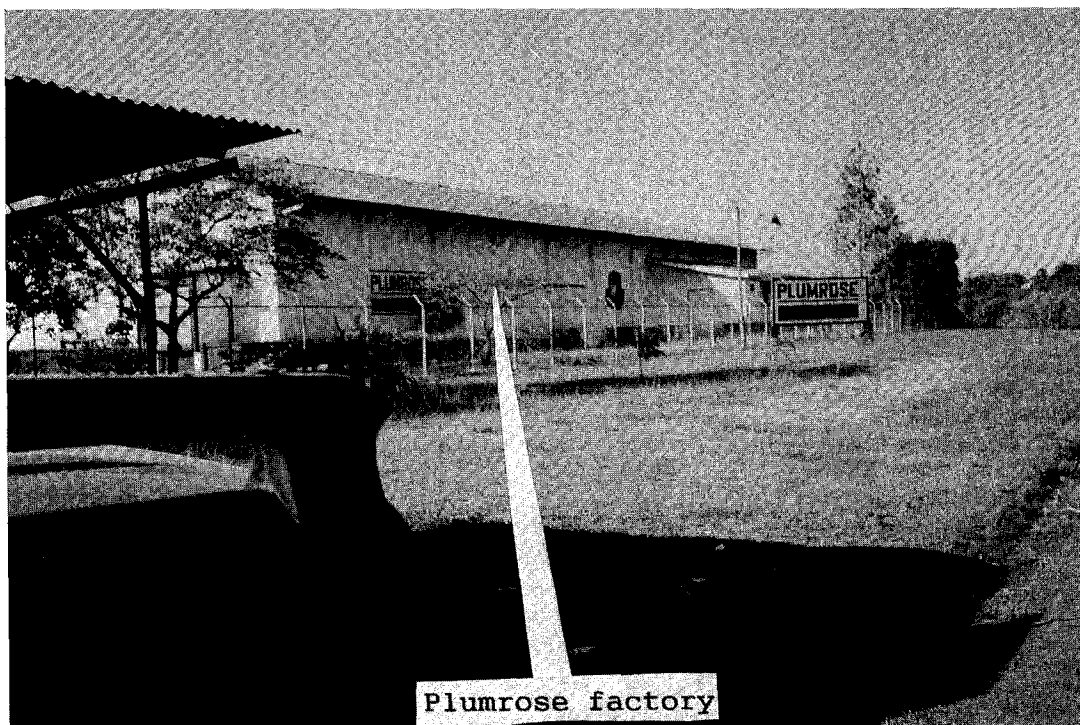
Fortunately the November meeting did come out with some priority issues for which immediate action was needed. But I think it was nature's intervention that halted the spread of dengue from November to February- the dry season. This is clear when you plot on a graph the reported number of dengue cases against time, you will find out that the decline in dengue had not been the work of man. The upsurge of new cases again in February showed that no real measures had been taken to control dengue since November, but only lip service.

On February 14, a Cuban experted on dengue was invited to give a talk (at Puntarenas Monsenor Sanabria hospital) about his country's experience with the disease in the early eighties and how it was controlled then. He told Ticos that in Cuba vector control was carried out by communities through elimination of

possible mosquito breeding places in neighborhoods, urban and rural. The Cuban Ministry of Public Health directed only health policy and people carried out the action. Ticos were inspired.

Three days later, on February 17, a huge press conference was called by a newly formed body calling itself Comision Cantonal Inter-institucional para la lucha contra el dengue en Puntarenas (Regional Inter-institutional commission for the fight against dengue)- a collection of 12 strong government institutions. I thought the alliance was a remarkable achievement for agencies that would not speak to each other only a few month or days ago.

As it were, their new agenda contained nothing surprising- just good common sense that first things should come first. And it wasn't surprising either to hear the new battle cry (of the regional commission) for the fight against dengue which was something like this: "limpieza de Puntarenas y que no quede ni un solo criadero" (cleaning of Puntarenas and that not a breeding place for mosquitos should remain)- a simple public health principle. I wondered why some people like to learn only the hard way.



After the press conference some friends told me that the regional commission was just making a big show-off because media agencies had come from the capital city, San Jose, to televise the event. Others said some people on the commission were (now) making serious gestures (only) for securing a higher job appointment in the next government. Perhaps my friends were right. For the sad story of El Barrio Carmen Lyra tells a lot

about who really cared or didn't care about community health in poor barrios in Puntarenas. "We continue to be abandoned by the government", was the view expressed by senora Carmen Salas, a resident of Carmen Lyra and a mother of three children. "The MOH workers started working (just recently) in the barrio because of dengue. The authorities never really bothered to visit the community in the past. Even when we had complained to them that the physical environment in which we lived was becoming increasingly unhealthy and contaminated due to causes (many of us believed) were related to the Plumrose factory which is located close to barrio."

"South-west of the barrio, there is a large lagoon into which drain industrial liquid wastes from Plumrose. The lagoon is located almost within the perimeter of the barrio and it has become a breeding place for many insects and mosquitos that carried malaria and dengue. It has been a very long time since we last saw the malaria-control workers come to spray the lagoon to kill mosquitos (thanks to dengue which has brought them back to work again). Already, many of our children suffered from fevers and some of them received treatment for malaria. Now we have dengue and don't know what is next."

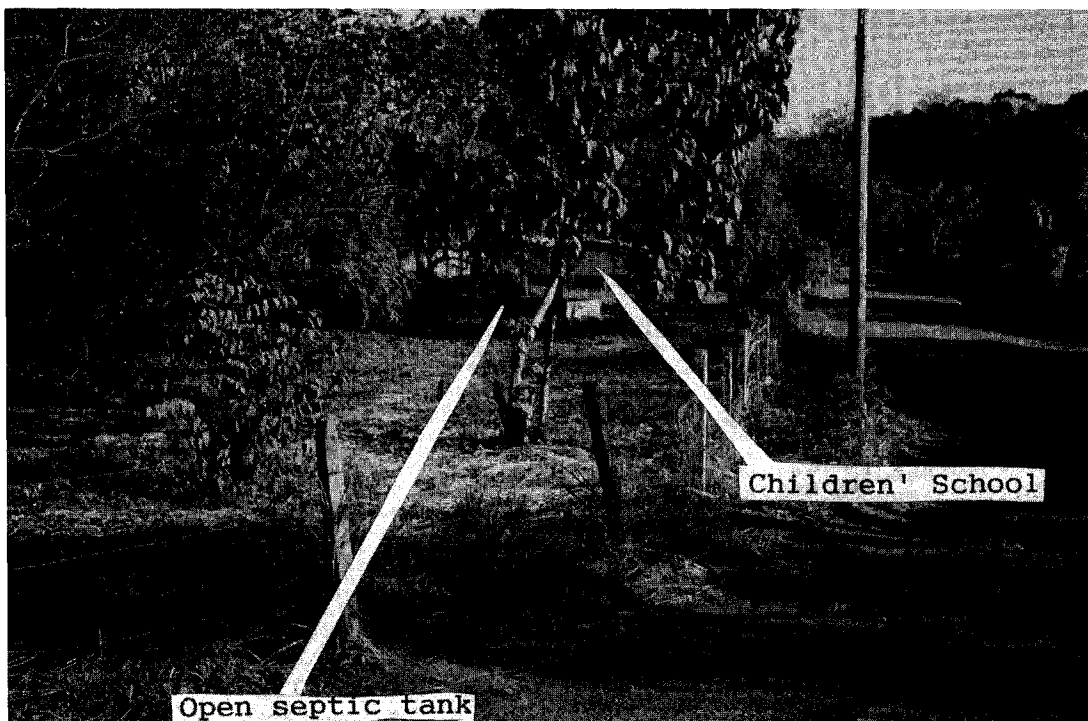
"Some children suffered from chest problems such^{as} bronchitis, asthmas and colds. Others suffered from diarrhoeas."



"We had asked the factory and municipal authorities before to connect the lagoon to the sewage treatment system (tuberia de aguas negras) and to eliminate this lagoon. But nobody did nothing. The lagoon continued to discharge liquid waste into river Barranca contaminating the river."

"The most appalling situation is the presence of an open septic tank at a distance of only three-to-four meters from children primary school where the Plumrose factory discarded dead animal matter such as pellejo (hide/skin), panza (belly) and others like animal excreta and cebo (feed for animals). The dead matter decomposed releasing malos olores (bad smells) into the school atmosphere which caused children to nauseate or vomit. As a result, the majority of children refused to eat their meals during break-time. The bad smells reached the barrio too."

"All we asked (Plumrose) for is to put a lid on the septic tank. This would prevent overflow of the contents of the tank outside. Already there was a pool of foul smelling liquid on the ground near the septic tank itself and you could see worms and maggots of different colors moving in it."

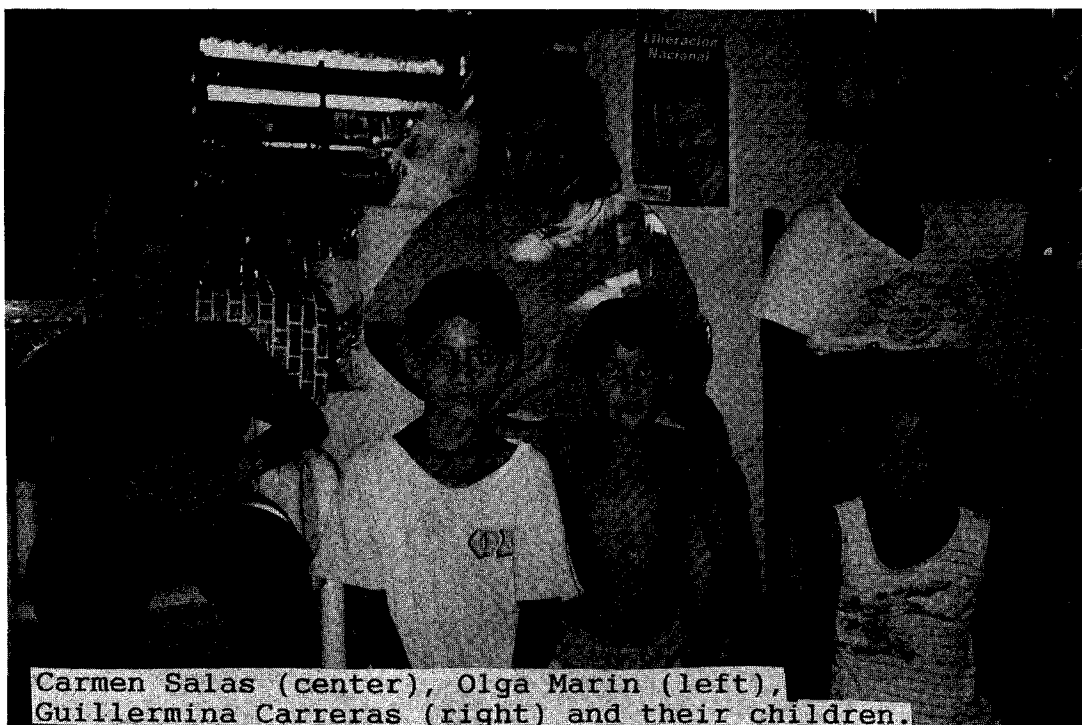


Senora Carmen Salas spoke from her heart. And to prove her point even better she invited me on February 11, to see the lagoon and the open septic tank near the children' school. No doubt she had told the truth. And your heart ached when you saw such real evidence, yet the so-called knowledgeable authorities didn't ever care to visit to see for themselves how their own citizens suffered. It was truly pitiful.

On the social and economic front, Senora Salas summarized the situation in Carmen Lyra in the following terms:

"Around 120 families live in the barrio, many of them poor. Average family incomes range from five-to-seven-thousands colones (32.4 to 45.4 US dollars). Many young people who are able to work

did not have jobs and some have become victims of alcoholism, drugs and anti-social behavior. It's cruel that in such a small barrio alcohol (produced illegally in some houses) was sold to young children ten-to-twelve years of age and this had only encouraged more child delinquency and prostitution. It is not uncommon to see such children standing on street corners in the barrio not doing any useful work, but only maltreating people and saying vulgarities to smaller children. Child molesting is not uncommon and child-molesters do not really get the punishment they deserved for their offensive acts. If a child was molested and the person who did that was taken to police, (many a time) the child-molester returned easily again to the barrio and nobody did nothing. Such dangerous person may commit yet another offense."



"We are even afraid to send our children to buy things from the canteen in the evenings for fear that they might be harassed by some thugs on the way," added Guillermina Carreras, a neighbor of senora Carmen Salas. "Even women like us are cautious to be out of house at night, everyone tried to be home by 8:00pm. Moreover, there is not a police office in Carmen Lyra and the only telephone available in the neighborhood hardly worked. It was a nightmare if you had an emergency of some kind in the middle of the night or the small hours of the morning. There is no bus or taxi services that connected Carmen Lyra to Barranca or Puntarenas centro. And you were lucky if you got a lift by a car on the highway."

But the story of Carmen Lyra is not just all that gloom and

doom. There was some good news for Carmen Lyra- the world was not yet short of good Samaritans. Dr Alfaro and his medical team from Barranca clinic were invited to study the health situation in the barrio and to access health needs. They decided to help.

A general physician will come to see and treat sick people once a week and consult with those who need help with medical advice.

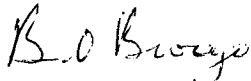
Senora Salas was pleased with Dr Alfaro's willingness to help. This has never happened to them before- they were going to have a medical doctor in the barrio for the first time!

"Gracias", said senora Salas thanking Dr Alfaro and his medical team. "I am really happy to tell you that the women's committee of barrio Carmen Lyra had decided to offer a one-room house (with veranda) for use as doctor clinic.

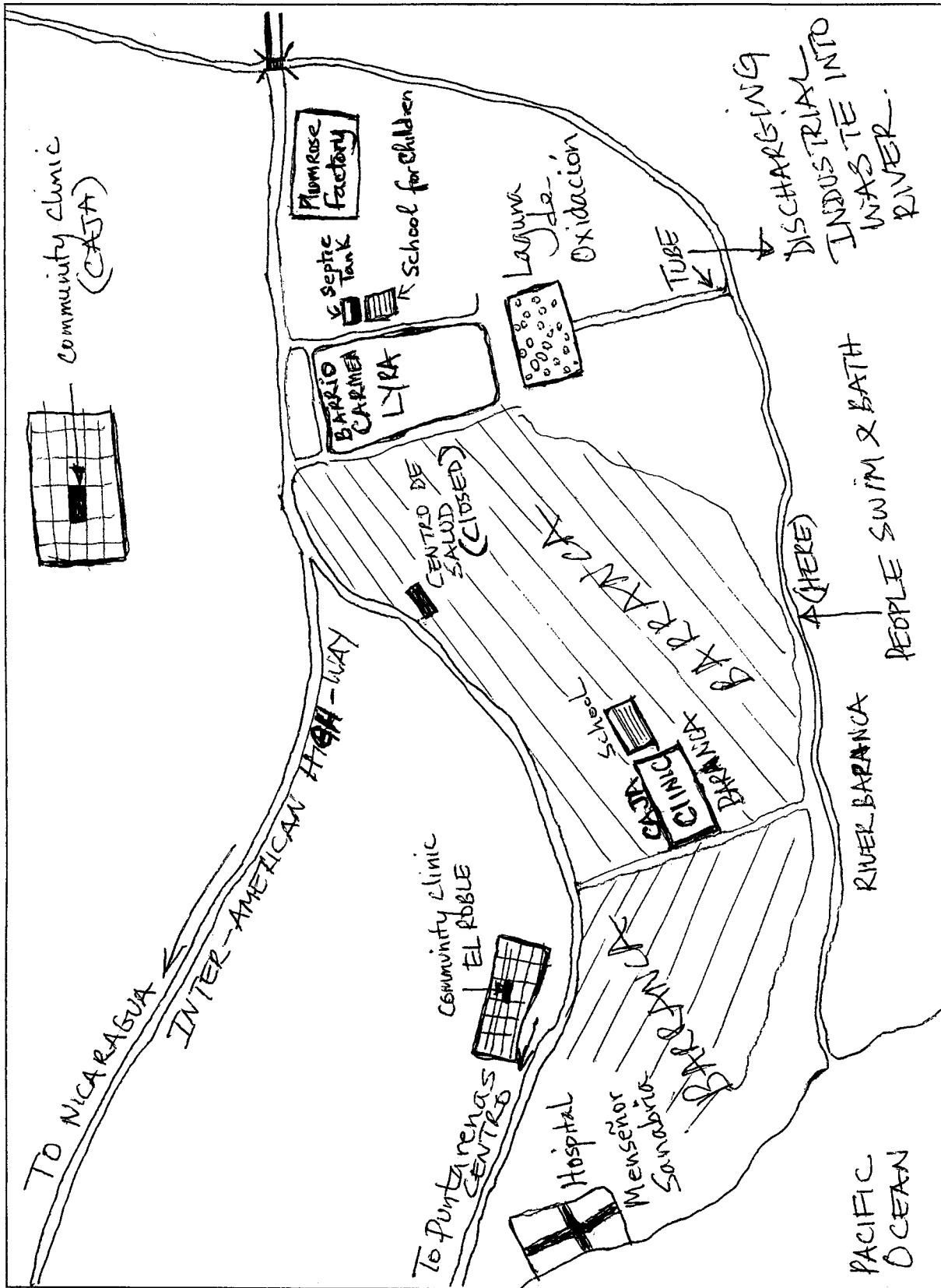
It is good news that some kind of health services will be provided to Carmen Lyra. Would plumrose factory also show the will to decide in favour of positive health by taking care of its 'laguna de oxidacion and the open septic tank' near the children's school? That could greatly demonstrate that human life is more valuable than making money. Don't you think so, senor Peter?

Como siempre, muchas gracias.

Yours sincerely,



Bacete O. Bwogo



SKETCH-MAP OF BARRANCA-PUNTARENAS

