

**PARTNERING FOR SUSTAINABILITY
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AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP

The expansive extension of environmental degradation, the evident increase in poverty, the continuing dilution of governance and authority, and the increase in so far unthinkable manifestations of violence, show us that we need to forge an different attitudes among all peoples. We need to become involved in working and preparing sets of values that will become integral part of our daily activities.

Almost four decades have passed since Rachel Carson; in her book Silent Spring exposed the dangers of DDT. She showed at that time, that human activities have transcended the sense of locality and inclusiveness. We have clearly experienced that some of the national regulations are very fragile, especially when those regarding environmental issues. Even though there may be acceptable standing legal rules and applicable compulsive systems, a lack of general application of these principles does in fact prevail in many of our countries.

It is important to remind us that in 1987 the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development made it clear that a new global approach was necessary to solve many of our current problems. The possibilities for a new era of economic growth were emphasized, in a future based on environmental policies that would allow for maintained and expanded use of Earth's resources. From there to now, sustainable development would not only focus on economic indicators. Human beings and especially the needs of future generations were brought to the forefront.

During more than ten years, CIELAP and AMBIO have worked together in partnership, by which we have been able to create a rich process of collaboration that has benefited both our organizations as well as our countries. For this we have counted with the support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

Both are non-governmental organizations, and that means that we recognize ourselves as a basic form of popular representation. Our joint efforts have been very significant in the development of governmental policies, especially in Costa Rica.

Our relation has been based on interrelated projects that fit on the mission and objectives of both our organizations, and the issues we have undertaken are linked by the same goal: to change human attitudes and improve public policies.

Let me summarize some of the work we have done in Costa Rica during these years of partnership.

Legal environmental center:

For more than three years, and as our initial project, we took to the attention of local citizens' complaints against violations of the constitutional right of all Costa Rican citizens to a healthy and ecologically sound environment.

We achieved many interesting results; our efforts have resulted in more understandable and practical guidelines for citizens to defend their right to live in a healthy and sustainable environment.

Environmental certification programs:

Also during those initial years, we centered our efforts in the development of links between public and private interests and the increase of individual responsibility in the pursuit of a more sustainable development process. We have stressed to develop practical solutions, based on individual responsibility, in order to improve macro as well as micro economic relationships, which may in turn result in direct incidence in the economic process of our country. Most notably among the programs undertaken is the development and promotion of a voluntary environmental certification scheme for banana growers. We must note that bananas, together with coffee, are our main source of foreign exchange and our principal agricultural products. The program has been so successful that environmental standards have become a matter of obligatory compliance in the banana industry, and this has extended on to other countries that have found the need to apply those standards in order to maintain their competitiveness.

Waste management programs:

This program, which centered on the development of individual responsibilities regarding a most pressing problem in our country, made us involve ourselves in a very hot issue, as it is still a mostly unresolved problem. We have developed positions on the fields of domestic waste management and plastic material waste disposal.

The problem of domestic waste management centers mainly not on the production of waste but on the development of responsible attitudes by individuals regarding the production of waste and the expected solution on the hands of public agencies. Even though the problem still persists, and it is very significant, we can see the effect of our efforts in some changes in which we could follow our trail and influence, mostly in the line of policy achievements.

As far as plastic material waste disposal is concerned, again a problem without a clear solution, we centered our efforts on conscience-raising programs in order to develop adaptable disposal methods of plastics. We developed training programs about appropriate technologies in the reuse and disposal of the plastic we consume.

During the last three years we have shifted our work, again with the support of CIDA, in other somewhat different activities, but always devised under the general guidelines of sustainable development.

Organic agriculture programs:

The emphasis of this program has been to promote organic agriculture as an environmentally sustainable alternative to mainstream agriculture in Costa Rica, and the experience has been useful for CIELAP to create avenues of understanding and promotion towards the consumption in Canada of organic products produced in our country.

AMBIO, with the support of CIELAP, has devised a system of on-hand training programs for small farmers, that is not only designed to provide the basic concepts of organic agriculture and pesticide reduction, but the means to ease the farmers on the transition process, through simple but effective actions that go from obtaining official recognition and facilitation for the obtention of regulatory

approval, to the identification of market niches and opportunities for appropriate financing to support their transformation efforts.

In part thanks to our effort we have been able to influence the political will, which has resulted in the implementation of more realistic and effective government regulations and requirements.

The enthusiastic reception of our programs by the farmers, shown in the extensive realization of workshops around the country, has made the program a significant learning experience. The strength of the program, again, has been shown by its positive results.

Biotechnology

The other objective was to raise awareness about regulatory issues related to biotechnology. We have worked to improve and strengthen the domestic environmental regulations and policy framework for the importation, manufacturing and use of products of modern biotechnology in Costa Rica.

We have prepared draft legislation for the consideration of legislators; in order to improve our regulations for genetically modified foods, especially for labeling and control of traceability.

Adoption of legislation is the first step towards generating an impact on this topic. We are aware that this is a very delicate issue, and that it is a long-standing commitment. Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to achieve our goals. However, our draft proposal is being considered as a basis for discussion. Presently, this proposal is part of the electronic forum that serves as a preamble for an April 14th meeting on the subject. (This can be consulted at the Ministry of the Economy home page: www.meic.go.cr).

Due to our continued work and efforts, the signature and later submission to the Legislative Assembly of the Biosafety Protocol (that requires labeling legislation also for foodstuffs), together with the active work of FAO in this subject, we foresee the approval of national legislation in the near future.

What is clear is that the movement that was started by our joint efforts on biosafety in Costa Rica has brought into public attention the need for GMO

regulations. Certainly there is more awareness on the subject. That, by itself, could be considered sufficient to judge the effectiveness of our efforts.

For any of these issues there is yet a lot to do. We know for certain that beyond our commitment, our work has been very significant and successful. We could not have done such an extensive work without the significant and continued financial cooperation and support of CIDA, to whom we are most thankful.

However, despite this success story, we have received very discouraging news from CIDA that, after so many years working together, they have suggested CIELAP that they should find another partner to go forth in their initiatives. The reasoning behind this seems to be that we have already benefited enough from their cooperation and that other organizations should have the opportunity we have had. It is difficult to understand the reasoning behind that suggestion.

We know for sure that all is not, and should not be, centered only in financial cooperation, but we all realize that it is a significant element in the success of these types of activities. Normally, in our countries there are practically no funds, public or private, directed to support development of environmental concerns. That is the reason behind our consistent request to CIDA for funds. We fear that this suggestion will result in a collapse of the efforts that for so many years we have been undertaking.

The strengthening of the organizations of civil society executing development projects in less developed countries should not be overlooked. Revision of efficiency criteria has to be one of the key elements in the results. This is a guarantee that the effects of the projects will continue to flow in spite of changed circumstances. Results should not only be measured in terms of numbers, but also in terms of acquired expertise.

The importance of the work built under the common effort of CIELAP and AMBIO, and the capacity both our organizations have developed for the benefit of shared interest in sustainable development, seems to be put at risk by what we consider an unfair decision from this agency of the Canadian government.

The role of non-governmental organizations has proven to be really important. NGO's conceive that their mission as that of informing and educating people, in order to truly empower citizens to make the proper choices and produce a significant change in their attitudes. We believe that this partnership built by joining the efforts of CIELAP and AMBIO, should be reinforced in order to magnify the results achieved until now, and project into the future a more significant role of organizations of civil society in the definition of sound policies and effective practical results.

Like human rights, environmental commitment has to become part of the educational process, as a basic element to define common aspirations. Individuals and groups may, with the consistent application of ethical values, be able to more justly affirm their rights and establish their positions and diverse interests in a more significant and convincing way. Perhaps the most important element to achieve effectiveness of the changes is the individual compromise to follow these principles on a daily and consistent basis.

A certainty about the principles that guide the attitudes and actions of those who interrelate with us will in fact provide more tranquility, more assurance and more transparency in human relations, between individuals and between nations.

We certainly hope that the experience of cooperation that I have presented to you this afternoon shall be understood as a valuable effort in that direction.

Thank you.

www.fundacionambio.org