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**➔ ECUADOR:  
NATIONAL DIALOGUE RALLIES CONSENSUS ON SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT**

**In a Nutshell**

In Ecuador, under the aegis of the Dialogue 21 programme, information and communication tools have created room for a public discourse that has brought together social, political, governmental and economic forces around sustainable human development.

Together, a spectrum of people have built consensus in a crisis situation, engendering trust and changing previously confrontational and suspicious mindsets. External agencies played a facilitating role, used flexible and adaptive aid instruments, built on the practices of local institutions, and inspired confidence among the different groups. The overall experience was so successful that it may offer a model for replication in other fragile states or post-crisis situations.

**The Story**

Dialogue 21 is an Ecuadorian national project that began in 1999. It encourages the use of information and communication for promoting sustainable development and initiating contact between the country's diverse (i.e. ethnic, racial, etc.) social actors. The project was designed to respond to Ecuador's climate of crisis, which is not only political, with four presidents in less than 18 months, but also economic and social. Different segments of Ecuadorian society have found themselves locked in a state of permanent confrontation.

The project works on three overlapping levels. The first develops capacity among local leaders through training and information awareness on matters relating to local sustainable development. Those with a high school education can study at the Universidad Politécnica Salesiana, where the curriculum includes

learning about the theory of sustainable development in a local environment, project design, resource mobilization, communication for development and social participation techniques. Those without a formal education can take part in an informal education process called a “local dialoguers’ network”, which organizes training workshops, distributes monthly information bulletins and broadcasts a twice-monthly radio programme where students can join in.

At its second level, Dialogue 21 participates in the design, management and approval of public policies that will lead to legislation supporting local action. One significant result of this was the Law on Parochial Committees, which took effect in October 2000. Dialogue 21 helped prepare the regulations governing the committees and negotiate an annual budget.

The third and all-embracing level promotes a national culture of dialogue through television and radio. TV spots show social actors in different situations, such as the military or the Church, talking with ethnic leaders. Their message is clear: “Dialogue is possible, dialogue enriches whoever engages in it as long as it is based on respect for others.” Radio spots are on specific sustainable development themes that are of interest to different provinces and localities. They are sent to community stations, and local personalities debate the subjects.

The synergy among all three levels of Dialogue 21 is of utmost importance. Training local leaders in sustainable development becomes significant to the extent that it is backed by national laws and a permanent culture of dialogue.

From its inception, Dialogue 21 has built systematically on the broader Capacity 21 methodology, used across Latin America and around the world to implement Agenda 21, the action agenda for sustainable development that emerged from the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development. In developing Ecuador’s local capacities for sustainable development, Capacity 21, as a neutral facilitator, has sparked confidence with its “horizontal style”. It uses three principles of Agenda 21: participation, information and integration. Engaging in a flexible, agreed-upon planning process, it adapts to the context and specific needs of those participating, and applies the lessons learned about sustainable development gathered from other countries in the region.

Dialogue 21 has now developed its own methodology, called “Esquinas para el Dialogo” (dialogue corners). It is a common Ecuadorian cultural practice for people to congregate in the course of their daily activities – in the neighbourhood, the parish, street corners, local shops and markets. They gather, talk about themselves and whatever is happening, and, in general, trade gossip. The challenge for Dialogue 21 was to adopt this practice for exchanging information about sustainable development at local, provincial and national levels.

To date, 18 “Esquinas para el Dialogo” have taken place – 14 local, three regional and one national – with a total participation of 883 people. Thirty-two per cent were women, 12 per cent were members of indigenous communities, and 4

per cent were Afro-Ecuadorians. National training was given to 60 communities, and there is now a network of 44 leaders or local “dialoguers” in place.

The following have been identified as challenges for the future: to work on building individual, local, national and global links for sustainable development; to strengthen the connections between projects and processes in order to clarify Dialogue 21’s role; to open lines of research on the relationship between self-esteem and the articulation of political opinions; and, as one of the best expressions of a strategy to develop local capacities, to work tirelessly on formal and informal education to train local leaders on sustainable development.

### Results and Critical Factors

The progress that has been made towards generating consensus and commitment to the principles of sustainable development, and the ability of formerly suspicious groups to work together may be attributed to the following:

- Using dialogue as a strategic instrument for building consensus, engendering trust and changing previously confrontational mindsets among diverse groups to chart a course forward in a post-crisis situation
- Building on the experiences and practices of local institutions and processes, and adapting these to meet contemporary needs
- Engaging external agencies in a facilitating role, which inspires confidence among stakeholder groups
- Using flexible and adaptable aid instruments that ensured the programme could respond to changing circumstances and needs
- Working at different levels to mobilize and strengthen different capacities, and in so doing, building synergy between the skills development of individuals, a revamped policy framework, and new participatory processes for dialogue and exchange among state and non-state actors

### Further information

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