



DEPARTMENT OF
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT



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Sustainable Development and the Organization of American States

BACKGROUND

Countries of the hemisphere of the Americas meet in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia — during the First Inter-American Meeting of Ministers and High-Level Authorities on Sustainable Development — in a time of unprecedented change. Since the first Summit of the Americas on Sustainable Development was held in 1996, progress continues in integrating economic development, social equality and environmental protection under the framework of sustainable development. Advances continue at the national and international levels in environmental law, environmental governance, supporting public participation in decision-making, and forging public-private sector partnerships.

The remarkable transformations underway in such information technologies as satellite sensing, remote sensing and geographic information systems are reshaping sustainable development policies, to advance our understanding of environmental change, to improve land-use planning, and to put in place early-warning systems for natural disasters.

Improvements in tracking the scale of economic, environmental and technological change also reveal the extent of challenges before the international community in building sustainable development. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), as much as 60 percent of the planet's critical ecosystems are currently degraded or are being used unsustainably. As critical ecosystem services are undermined, the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals will become more difficult.



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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

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Today, over 75 million people in the Americas lack access to clean water. More than 137 million lack access to adequate sanitation. A growing number of communities are exposed to natural and man-made disasters. Agriculture is among the most significant sources of livelihood in the hemisphere. However, rural poverty and social exclusion remain major problems. While some progress has been made in supporting sustainable agriculture, sustainable forest

management and sustainable tourism, win-win markets remain fledgling, and their benefits have not alleviated rural poverty. Over the past decade, the hemisphere recorded the highest rate of forest loss of any region on the planet: approximately four million hectares of forest disappear on average each year, exacerbating a host of developmental, social and environmental problems, including the loss of productive top-soils for agricultural production; increasing water-management problems related to sedimentation; increasing the risks of flooding and mud-slides; and accelerating the loss of the region's rich endowment of biological diversity.

The human health implications of environmental degradation are being understood more clearly by the scientific community. Pollution and environmental destruction are considered to be the "trigger" for one-quarter of all global

diseases that could be averted. For children, the situation is worse: the World Health Organization determines that environmental exposure causes one-third of all diseases of children under five. Compounding existing environmental concerns, the human health effects of climate change are only now beginning to be understood. By altering average temperatures and rainfall patterns, extreme events — such as more frequent and more powerful hurricanes and tropical storms, as well as extreme drought — are expected to increase in the coming years. These changes are expected by many scientists to increase the incidence of several environmental health problems, including malaria and other diseases.

Those most affected by environmental degradation are the more than 200 million people in the hemisphere trapped in poverty. The vicious cycle of poverty, income inequality and environmental degradation remains the major challenge to countries in translating sustainable development into action.

Linking Environmental Degradation and Economics: A long-standing challenge to sustainable development is to integrate environmental considerations into economics and the developmental agenda. The consequences of environment-related human health problems cost billions per annum, measured in higher health-care expenditures, lost earnings and lower productivity. Water contamination alone leads to thousands of premature deaths each year: according to the Pan-American Health Organization, dirty water affects the health of 75 million people in the hemisphere.

Among the conclusions of the November 2006 Report to the UN Secretary General on UN reform regarding the sustainable development and environmental agendas is the need to mainstream economic considerations into policy-making, and to make better-use of a range of environmental economic tools, including cost-benefit analysis, valuation and other well-established methodologies.

The Department of Sustainable Development is working with member States and key partners from civil society and the private financial services sector to improve understanding of the links between economic development and the environment. It seeks to disseminate information and best practices that have originated within the region in innovative financing arrangements, such as Payment for Ecological Services (PES). An on-line database of recent PES projects and transactions,



including lessons from Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil and others, was created to identify tangible, concrete policies that deliver win-win developmental and environmental benefits.

Regional Cooperation and Leadership:

Advances in Payment for Ecological Services is one of many examples in which countries of the Americas have adopted innovative policies to address sustainable development challenges. Countries of the hemisphere are leaders in a range of sustainable development actions, notably forging cooperation to manage transboundary water resources. Some of the oldest water cooperation treaties in the world originate in the Americas. Examples include cooperation between Nicaragua and Costa Rica in supporting the sustainable management of the San Juan River Basin; the eight-country Amazon Cooperation Treaty - which marks its 25th anniversary in 2006; the five-country La Plata Basin Treaty among many others.

For more than thirty years, the OAS Department of Sustainable Development has worked with countries in supporting their efforts to strengthen cooperation

in integrated water resource management. In the past decade, it has worked with member countries through the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and partner organizations of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank on a number of GEF-supported international waters projects and programs.

The Department of Sustainable Development currently executes over 50 multi-country programs and projects with a combined (co-financing) value of approximately \$80 million, or approximately \$10 million per annum. Given limited financial resources to address numerous problems, the thematic areas of action comprise:

- Sustainable management of freshwater resources;
- Improving risk reduction for natural disasters;
- Advancing renewable energy and energy efficiency;
- Supporting the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity;
- Promoting the sound management of chemicals; and
- Environmental Law and Policy.



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Environmental Governance: One lesson of recent years in building sustainable development is the indispensable role that good governance plays. Good environmental governance covers a range of issues, including supporting participation and accountable decision-making, ensuring open access to environmental information, the political process and the judicial system. The OAS member States have made a strong commitment to basic notions of good governance, including the adoption of the Inter-American Strategy for the Promotion of Public Participation in Decision-Making for Sustainable Development (ISP) in 2000 and the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001. Building upon these commitments, the Department of Sustainable Development works with member countries in five inter-related areas of good governance.

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Information for Decision-Making: A prerequisite of effective policy-making is that it be guided by timely and accurate information. A key activity of the GEF-portfolio of international waters activities executed by the OAS is to conduct a scientific diagnostic of some of the most important wider water basins on the planet. For example, scientific assessments formed the basis of projects in the wider San Juan basin-which includes the largest freshwater lake in Central America; the wider Amazon River Basin-the largest and most important hydrological system on the planet; the wider La Plata Basin; the Pantanal-the largest wetland area in the hemisphere; and the Guarani-the largest groundwater aquifer under co-management in the world.

These scientific studies are helping countries identify existing and emerging risks critical to policy planning. For example, both the GEF-supported Amazon and Plata projects are identifying the possible impacts of climate change on those freshwater basins. This information will become critical as countries examine the regional impacts of climate change on hydrological cycles, and the upstream and downstream effects

on development, including energy, agriculture and rural development, and transportation.

In the area of natural disasters, the Department of Sustainable Development focuses on bridging increasingly sophisticated early warning systems, based on satellite imagery, GIS systems and other sensing devices, with local community and planning needs. Examples include work in the Caribbean in mapping communities and infrastructure vulnerable to climate change, and providing assistance in practical risk-reduction activities that improve the resilience of communities, homes and public buildings, through appropriate building codes and standards, and linking land-title data with land zoning.

In the area of biodiversity conservation, the Department of Sustainable Development works through the Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN) to facilitate on-going partnerships among scientific institutions, national parks, and non-governmental organizations in improving the quality and accessibility of information related to biodiversity.

In the area of environmental law and policy, the Department of Sustainable Development serves as a regional forum for dialogue and exchange among OAS member States regarding developments in legal institutional frameworks, enhancing the capacity of countries to meet challenges related to the link between economic development and environmental protection.

More recently, the Department of Sustainable Development has responded to requests from countries in helping them in the sound management of chemicals, including identifying sub-regional cooperation options in managing priority chemicals such as PCBs, furans and other persistent organic pollutants covered under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

Access to Environmental

Information: A closely related component of good governance is to ensure that information is accessible to the key actors in the public and private sectors. The Department of Sustainable Development helps countries support improvements in the accessibility of information, through various hemispheric networks.

Other examples include supporting virtual forums to track progress in the implementation of commitments adopted by the ministers of health and environment at the Health and Environment Ministers of the Americas (HEMA) meeting, held in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in June 2005.

Technical Capacity Building:

All the projects and programs of the Department of Sustainable Development comprise technical capacity-building, intended to respond to requests from member countries. For example, the major focus of natural disaster risk reduction is to work with national and municipal authorities in “bridging” early warning information with local community needs, as well as increasing the resilience of communities to natural disasters, through such efforts as improving the enforcement of building codes and standards, linking land zoning and land title efforts with disaster mitigation efforts, and providing information to communities regarding climate vulnerability in the Caribbean region.

In renewable energy, the Department of Sustainable Development provides technical information to countries including practical measures regarding pre-financing to expand its deployment. In environmental law and policy, the Department works with member countries in improving environmental assessments of development options, as well as providing training to strengthen legal and institutional frameworks for environmental management, in the context of increasing developing challenges.

INFORMATION AND CAPACITY-BUILDING NETWORKS AND VIRTUAL FORUMS

One lesson of sustainable development is the role that good governance plays in supporting national and regional action. The Department of Sustainable Development works closely with representatives of national governments, as well as civil society and international partners such as UNEP, the World Bank, IICA, PAHO and IDB, in supporting various Inter-American networks for sustainable development. These networks share common characteristics of sharing technical information for capacity-building and best practices as well as lessons in what did not work and why. The current system of hemispheric networks includes:

- The Inter-American Water Resource Network (IWRN);
- The Renewable Energy in the Americas Initiative (REIA);
- The Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP);
- The Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN);
- The Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM); and
- The Inter-American Forum on Environmental Law (FIDA).

In integrated water resource management, capacity building actions support the development of water management policies, laws and regulations at the national, regional and local levels; the establishment of improved institutional frameworks; the assessment of environmental conditions and changes; building of capacity of local communities, including indigenous groups, in sustainable land management; and disseminating best practices and facilitating technology transfer, among others.

Public Participation: A cross-cutting feature of all programs and projects of the OAS is to support proactively public participation. In the process of developing policies at the hemispheric level, a standard practice of the Department is to solicit civil society input, through regional consultations and virtual on-line forums. Moreover, the implementation of participatory and decentralized projects for the integrated management of water resources in the

transboundary river basins are models used elsewhere. For example, during the preparation of the Sao Francisco and Upper Paraguay/ Pantanal projects, thousands of individuals in local communities, including municipal authorities have been directly engaged in consultations towards the formulation of policies and partnerships.

For more information on the work of the DSD, please see <http://www.oas.org/dsd/>



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