

A guide for municipalities in southern Ecuador Participatory local development planning

Ecuador



Local People

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Development

Seven years after the ending of the border dispute between Ecuador and Peru, the southern provinces of Ecuador still face high levels of poverty. There are signs of change, however. As a result of the process of decentralisation, municipalities are now required to draw up their own local development plans, specifying policies, strategies and programmes. The plans have led to improved coordination between the public and private sectors, and to joint initiatives for the development of the region. Based on its experiences in supporting several municipalities, SNV has helped to compile a guide for formulating the plans, including a participatory process that ensures that all local stakeholders have a say in their own development.

Ecuador's southern provinces

The signing of a peace accord in 1998 brought to an end the border conflict between Ecuador and Peru that had lasted for more than half a century. For the people of Ecuador's southern provinces, the conflict had resulted in minimal economic development, increasing levels of poverty, and weak local institutions that offered no broad vision for the development of the region.

After 1998 the municipalities continued their traditional way of working, focusing on a few short-term activities that benefited only small local elites with political connections. They made little effort to adapt to the new realities of peace, or to respond to the growing expectations of the population. With limited resources and with no clear picture of their new role, many local authorities had become obstacles to economic development rather than facilitators and promoters of change. Civil society organisations and the private sector were also generally regarded as ineffective, tending to work in isolation, and reluctant to assume responsibility for any development action.

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With the signing of the peace accord and the recent decentralisation process have come increasing expectations for change, especially in the rural areas where employment is scarce, poverty is widespread and levels of emigration are high. There is a lot of interest in reform, but it will take time to change the ways of powerful local elites and ineffective civil society organisations.

Local government in Ecuador

The population of the southern provinces had few expectations of local governments other than as providers of basic services. The oil boom of the 1970s meant that resources were available and produced a culture of short-term thinking in which a vision and strategies for development were not needed. Little was done to improve the lives of those living in poverty, and the few long-term plans that did exist had been drawn up by external consultants, without involving local stakeholders, and usually ended up in a drawer.

Local governments in Ecuador are hierarchical, bureaucratic and inefficient institutions. Only during election campaigns do mayors and councillors make an effort to listen to their constituents and to meet some of their most urgent demands. Although the municipalities are well staffed, few employees have the training or skills necessary to provide quality services. Appointments and promotion depend on having the right contacts, and staff change after each election so there is little continuity of effort. Salaries are low, as is morale, and corruption is widespread. Thus far, municipal councils have not regarded themselves as coordinators and facilitators of local development. They work mainly with government agencies and are seen as puppets of the national government in Quito.

Under the recent decentralisation legislation (the Reform of Municipalities Act, 2004), however, each municipality is now required to formulate, coordinate and implement its own local development plan (plan de desarrollo cantonal). These plans are to be submitted to the national government for approval, based on which the funds necessary for their implementation will be released. With the decentralisation of responsibilities to the local level, it is hoped that the municipalities will become more efficient, more responsive to local demands, and thus more accountable.

The participatory process

SNV started its work in Loja and El Oro provinces in 1996 in a project financed by the Netherlands Embassy. It was also involved in an international effort to support the Ecuador–Peru peace process, in a programme funded by USAID and coordinated by CARE. This programme had three components: strengthening democracy, supporting local governments, and formulating development plans that would respond to the growing demands of local stakeholders to play a greater role in their own development. Based on its experiences in other countries, SNV was asked to develop a methodology for compiling the plans, with an emphasis on participatory processes.

Since 2000 SNV has assisted eight municipalities in the provinces of Loja, El Oro and Zamora-Chinchipec in the formulation of their local development plans. In this process, SNV works with three groups of stakeholders:

- local development committees in which public and private sectors and civil society are represented;
- local service providers involved in developing and strengthening local capacities, including NGOs, universities and government agencies;
- donors and local governments involved the planning process.

All of these stakeholders have a role to play in alleviating poverty, although until now they have not always been effective. The participatory process of producing a development plan therefore brings them together to analyse the causes of poverty, and to design joint efforts to address them. SNV has facilitated this process, emphasising that local development is a shared responsibility and that the support of all stakeholders is vital. Although there is still a long way to go, the preliminary results are promising. Together with a local partner, SNV has worked with the staff of municipalities and local development committees to assist them in preparing their plans. Formulated in a participatory process lasting six months, each plan outlines the needs of the population in four areas – human development, economic development, institutional development, and land and natural resource management. It also specifies the policies, strategies, programmes and projects that will be introduced over the next ten years to address those needs.



Local development plans published by five municipalities in Loja province.

After facilitating this process for six municipalities, it became clear that a set of guidelines would help to ensure the consistency and coherence of the plans, particularly those of neighbouring municipalities. It was also recognised that international, national and local stakeholders needed to be involved in order to encourage coordination among donors, NGOs, local governments and civil society. Thus, together with CARE, two German agencies (GTZ and DED) and local partners, SNV began the process of compiling a methodological guide for local participatory strategic planning.



Guía Metodología para la Planificación

The guide is the result of a collective effort of international and local development organisations that lasted from 2000 to 2004. Based on the experiences of municipalities in the three provinces, the guide specifies the steps to be taken, and tools and instruments that can be used in the process of formulating the plans. The guide has already been distributed to 300 local and national organisations on CD, and a printed version will be published in early 2005.

Addressing priorities

Most municipalities in Loja, El Oro and Zamora-Chinchipe provinces now have their own development plans that they can use to address priorities, together with local actors. They recognise that they have an important role to play in coordinating the implementation of the plans. Having complied with the legal requirement to formulate their plans, the municipalities can now demand new competencies and responsibilities, and the funds promised in the decentralisation law. The local development committees are becoming stronger and more effective, in particular in improving coordination between the public and private sectors, and in providing a platform where civil society can contribute to the development process. The committees also organise round table meetings where donors, government agencies and local organisations can meet to discuss specific problems and decide on new interventions.



Participants in a round table meeting, Celica, Loja province, July 2004.

While the plans in themselves do not change a great deal, they create the conditions for municipalities, the private sector and civil society to work together to address common problems. Perhaps most important, the participatory process of formulating the plans is a way in which citizens can begin to take the development of the region into their own hands.

For their part, local governments and other organisations need to become more responsive and accountable to citizens, and for this capacity building will be essential. SNV and GTZ are therefore now working with the Association of Ecuadorian Municipalities (AME) to identify new capabilities that will be needed to implement the plans, and to develop training services to be provided by AME.

The first step to development

Now that most development plans are available in printed form, there is a much better understanding among all stakeholders of both local and regional problems. Through exchange visits, the staff of neighbouring municipalities are realising that they have much in common in terms of the problems they need to address, and that they are more likely to be effective if they collaborate in joint efforts. As an example, seven municipalities recently launched an initiative to coordinate their efforts in areas such as promoting tourism and water resources management.

In implementing the strategies outlined in the plans, the municipalities are opening up to the need to change their internal structure and culture. They have concrete

arguments to support their demand for further decentralisation, and to be consulted by external organisations or donors who decide to work in the region. They are now taken more seriously at both local and national levels.

Although the plans are unlikely to have an immediate impact on poverty, the participatory planning process is an important first step. They have already yielded several benefits – in particular the recognition that well functioning municipal councils, working in coordination with local development committees and other stakeholders, are essential for development.

Throughout the region the development process has received a much-needed impetus, and local actors are convinced that their work will produce tangible results in the efforts to reduce poverty in the coming years.

In early 2005 the newly elected local authorities will present the guide, and their development plans, to other municipalities, organisations and donors, who must now take them into account as the first step in a development process initiated and led by the local population.

'Maybe the development plans as documents are not of the highest quality, but what counts in the end is that they have been and will continue to function as instruments for the development process.'

Don Cristobal Acaro, round table participant, Sozaranga

'Participating in the elaboration of the development plan has been a great experience. I learned that my contribution and interests have been taken into account for the development of my hometown.'

Carlos Bustamante Garcia, coordinator, municipality of Pindal

'We are aware that our development is sustainable when it is based upon our participation; our contribution is the basis for development and what history shows us.'

Dr Jofre Córdova, president of a local development committee

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Resources

For a copy of the Guía Metodología para la Planificación Estratégica Cantonal y Participativa (in Spanish), please contact SNV Ecuador:

www.snv.org.pe/SNV_Ecuador/Loja/Actividades_y_resultados/actividades_y_resultados.html

Association of Ecuadorian Municipalities / Asociación de Municipalidades Ecuatorianas (AME): www.ame.gov.ec

Consejo Nacional de Modernización del Estado / National Council for State Modernization (CONAM):

www.conam.gov.ec

Plan Binacional Capítulo Ecuador / Ecuador-Peru peace accords: www.planbinacional.gov.ec



The southern provinces of Ecuador

SNV is dedicated to a society where all people enjoy the freedom to pursue their own sustainable development. Our advisors contribute to this by strengthening the capacity of local organisations.

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