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Institutional issues for monitoring local development in Ecuador

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• Introduction

COMUNIDEC is a national Ecuadorian NGO that develops and promotes participatory methodologies that help empower local communities. It has developed a participatory monitoring and evaluation, known as SISDEL (*Sistema de Desarrollo Local*, or Local Development System). SISDEL is part of a local development programme that focuses on building human capacities in small rural municipalities marked by poverty and an indigenous population. This programme is working directly in 5 municipalities, (and indirectly in another 10), each of which has experienced more than 10 years of systematic development interventions through NGOs, government programmes, churches, development aid agencies, community-based organisations, and in some cases private enterprise.

The development of SISDEL has been possible due to two trends in Ecuador that are the result of 30 years of agricultural policies. First is an emphasis on development priorities in rural areas, rather than towns. This has revived some municipalities and stimulated municipal leaders to develop more decentralised strategic planning processes. Second is the rise of a diverse range of rural organisations and coalitions that represent the 'social capital' needed for sustainable development (notwithstanding internal management and leadership problems). These two trends have created much demand for participatory methodologies that can help build local institutional capacity. This has resulted in the development of SISDEL and this article

describes how SISDEL is being used to integrate planning, monitoring and evaluation of social development projects.

What is SISDEL?

SISDEL is a young evolving methodology, with just two years of use. It is being used by municipal-level rural extension workers, leaders and promoters of rural organisations, NGO staff and government extension staff. It is based on another self-evaluation methodology used since 1994 by the Inter American Fund (IAF), 'Marco de Desarrollo de Base', that analyses the impact of social development projects. We used the IAF methodology in 30 projects over a three year period during which we realised the importance of doing monitoring and evaluation within the project cycle, and not just adding participatory reporting of impacts at the end.

Basically, SISDEL stimulates collaboration between different groups in project formulation, encourages agreements based on expected impacts, helps those who are implementing projects to make better decisions through monitoring, and systematically evaluates the impacts to encourage learning. Methodologically it involves training the teams that manage local development projects to link existing resources with opportunities and promote those synergies that enable sustained change.

For this to work, three aspects are crucial:

- Existing social organisations are the main factors that determine the quality of expected impacts. Their vitality and their ability to mobilise is essential. They must

have active members with clear interests. It is not necessary for them to be formal organisations but they must be able to bring together different groups in society and be credible enough for local people to get involved.

- The project must be clearly formulated and build on local capacities and forms of interaction. SISDEL values local culture by using methods that are compatible with local customs and socio-economic conditions. Incorporating local forms of participation, co-operation and solidarity is crucial, as is using existing expertise and adopting forms of management used by local organisations.
- Good social engineering (adapted from Kottak 1995) is possible only when local people drive the project cycle, as this allows for valuable collective learning. The timing of project cycles cannot be imposed and driven by external agents. Instead, local legitimacy and learning are central to the process. It also means that the implementing-evaluating team must be linked to local organisations and institutions throughout the project cycle. The cycle is a continuous process of collecting and systematising information to solve management problems, that links local leaders and authorities with residents, and technicians with management staff.

• The structure of SISDEL

In practice, SISDEL is a collaborative process of self-reflection between organisations and institutions in one geographic area. By discussing problems and ranking proposed solutions, action is undertaken and the impacts are compared against expected results.

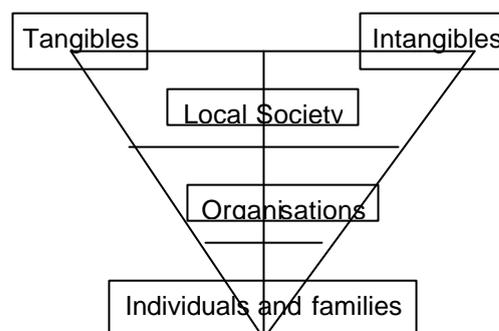
Levels and types of desired impacts

SISDEL emphasises impacts more than activities. It recognises that local action can provoke three levels of impacts, each being equally important. The first level involves the immediate impacts for individuals and families. Second are the impacts that affect organisations (or social capital), such as

empowerment and representation. The third level of impacts affect local society in general.

In the SISDEL methodology we have also distinguished three different types of impacts: material, human and spiritual. These are seen as a continuum of tangible and intangible impacts. Tangible impacts are changes that are perceived directly, events that can be observed, counted, measured and documented quickly. Intangible impacts are more subtle, internal changes that can also be registered and documented but only indirectly. Figure 1 shows how these different levels and types of impacts interact.

Figure 1. Levels and types of impacts of the SISDEL methodology



Categories, variables and indicators

The combination of three levels and two types (tangible and intangible) of impacts means there are six main categories of impacts that strategically guide local development activities through the project cycle:

1. At the individual or family level, the more tangible impacts relate to *Quality of Life*. These identify changes in people's environment and their livelihood strategies. The less tangible impacts relate to *Personal Capacities*, and describe changes in expectations, motivation and individual interventions in the project.
2. At the organisational (or social capital) level, the more tangible impacts deal with *Local Management*, i.e. changes in the capacity of organisations and municipalities to affect change. The

intangible impacts concern *Collaborative Disposition* and describe changes in the development values and behaviours of local leadership.

3. The local society level of impacts assesses tangible changes in *Civil Society Opportunities*, or impacts related to institutional democracy. The less tangible impacts relate to *Popular Culture*, identifying collective changes towards more tolerance and respect of social and cultural diversity.

Within each category, various variables can be assessed. For our own use of SISDEL in Ecuador, we identified 20 impacts that were particularly relevant (see Figure 2). These variables can be adapted to focus on specific development issues, such as improvements in gender relations, productivity, the environment, or culture.

Each variable can be broken down into several indicators. However, to avoid falling victim to the tyranny of indicators, we limited ourselves to two indicators per variable, focusing on those best able to inform us about project impacts (see Table 1).

As the indicators simply describe some concrete aspects of local realities, they should not be seen as absolute and comprehensive interpretations of change. The monitoring involves using the indicators to collect data and comparing changes over time against a simple baseline situation. Our baseline is described in terms of the six categories and 20

variables. The indicators can register positive and negative impacts and can be numbers or opinions, reflecting quantitative and qualitative information.

To be effective, it is not necessary to use all the categories or levels of impacts. SISDEL is not a rigid framework. On the contrary, it is adaptable to whatever level or category, with different combinations and different indicators. This depends on the context, objectives, and project characteristics.

Applying SISDEL in the project cycle

SISDEL can be used at all four stages of the project cycle. It offers techniques for consultation and self-evaluation during project formulation, supports negotiations when the project application is submitted, produces statistical tables and frequency diagrams to facilitate monitoring during project implementation, and uses interviews and workshops to evaluate the impact and compare it to local expectations.

The whole cycle is held together by the project management system, a set of procedures and instruments for bringing objectives to fruition. Project management includes decision-making mechanisms, actions for directing project work, and technologies used by the team during implementation to channel energy and activities along the lines established by the organisations.

Figure 2: Our SISDEL variables

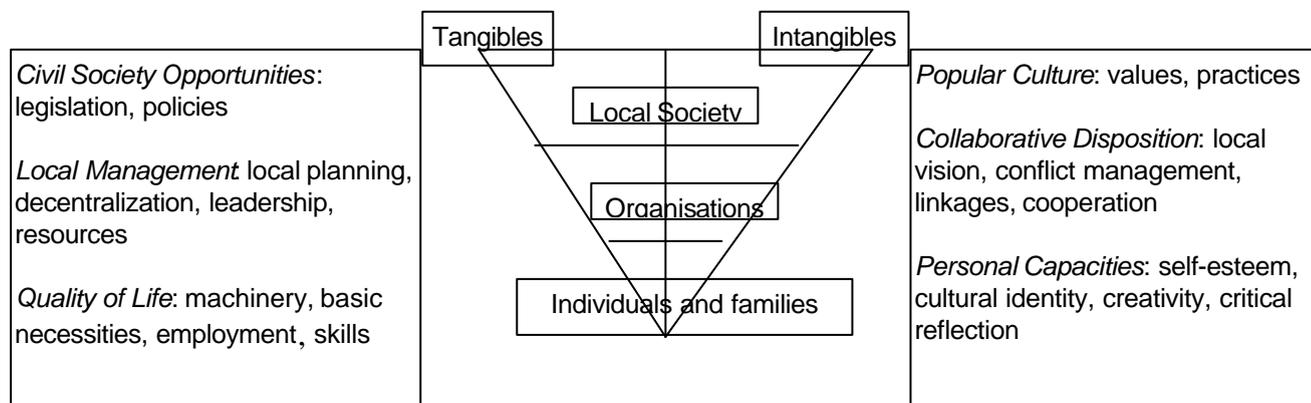
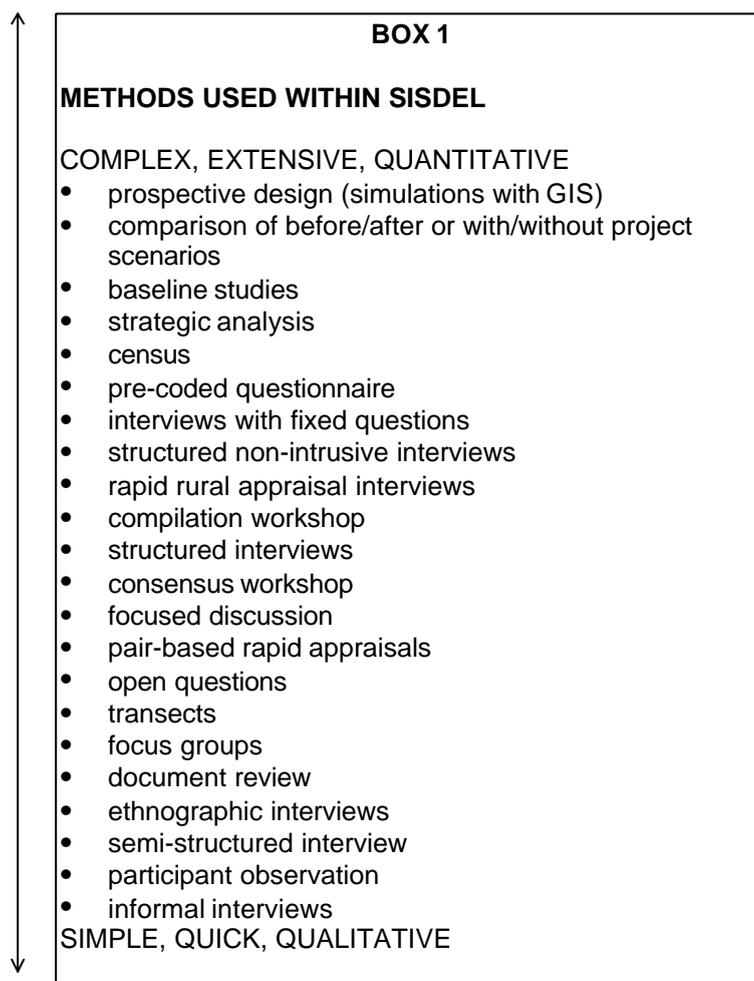


Table 1. SISDEL-related indicators identified as used by COMUNIDEC and partners

TANGIBLE INDICATORS	INTANGIBLE INDICATORS
<i>Civil Society Opportunities</i> Laws Enactment, amendment or revocation of legal measures Application of legal capacities Policies Influence to change local interests into public actions implementation of public policy	<i>Popular Culture</i> Values Degree of civil and social responsibility Action in a setting of local socio-cultural diversity Practices Response to the scale of alternatives Dissemination of results
<i>Local Management</i> Decentralisation Autonomy in political decisions Local responsibility for expenditure Planning Incorporation in plans of local demands Degree of flexibility to adjust plans Leadership Degree of local participation in strategic decisions Capacity to facilitate local processes Resources Proportion of locally-mobilised resources Percentage of self-management	<i>Collaborative Tendencies</i> Local vision Identification of opportunities for action Capacity to assess consequences and modify to local context Conflict management Capacity to recognise incompatibilities Capacity to reach agreements Linkages Extent of participation in networks and forums Local problems leading to networks/links Co-operation Recognising multiple interests Management of negotiation mechanisms
<i>Quality of Life</i> Basic Necessities Satisfaction of housing, education, health needs Changes in quality of life perceived by local people Machinery Type of communal equipment Collective services rendered Employment Number of jobs created or maintained Annual average income Skills Type of local knowledge incorporated Events during which local knowledge was used	<i>Personal Capacities</i> Self-esteem Number of people who changed their self-perceptions Types of new roles/tasks that people assumed Cultural identity Extent to which local customs and traditions were valued Creativity Openness to innovation Application of innovative solutions Critical reflection Capacity to explain reality Recognising and learning from errors

In practice, SISDEL makes use of many different methods to collect information and systematise the findings. These methods range between two extremes: those that are simple and quick and those that are complex and extensive (see Box 1). When choosing which method was most appropriate, we aimed to strike a balance between responding to different expectations while communicating the results to different local audiences. For example, the local development team needs to prove tangible impacts to funding agencies ('agencias auspiciantes') while at the same time stimulating the local population to develop ownership over the project, or adding project monitoring within the long term strategic planning processes of local

government while responding to the daily needs of farmers. The choice of methods will depend on various factors: the degree of education of those implementing the project; their skill with different methods; their interest in specific methods; and how the impacts will be analysed and findings used. The main challenge is to ensure that the methods allow different audiences/groups to discuss the impacts and allow the implementing team to learn.



Different roles and methods

COMUNIDEC's use of SISDEL in the five municipalities involved building the capacity of local facilitators to use the methodology. 'Learning by doing' was the main principle. In each case, we started with a workshop about the project cycle for the local project team as these people were also responsible for the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the projects.

The composition of the 'teams' varied. For example, in the municipality of Bolivar, it was mainly municipal extension agents, while in Guamote it was a combination of municipal officials and indigenous extension agents of a community organisation and in Cotacahi and Suscal the team also included NGO staff. All the teams were managed by local leaders and authorities. COMUNIDEC facilitators supported the local teams only in the first

project cycle to help them integrate SISDEL-related skills and activities.

We first started with project formulation, clarifying who had committed themselves to what action in the implementation phase. The local teams were then able to update this information at each phase of the project as a type of accountability. Project formulation itself was carried out during a three-day workshop on 'Self-Evaluation of Resources and Opportunities'¹. It is an event that is open to anyone and to which all the local organisations and institutions are invited. A type of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA, or *sondeo*) is carried out in pairs, using semi-structured interviews. The proposed solutions are clustered and documented and the baseline information is collated.

¹ Autoevaluación de Recursos y Oportunidades (TARO).

During the monitoring phase, three activities are undertaken: (1) monitoring the achievement of inter-institutional agreements; (2) measuring the baseline to register how implemented activities are achieving the expected impacts; and (3) collecting information to help make management decisions. Data is collected in groups using transects, semi-structured interviews, maps, and sometimes focus groups. The information is compiled in tables and histograms that graphically show the change in indicators over time. These graphs are public information and are displayed in the municipal headquarters of the project.

Monitoring activities are fitted in alongside other project activities and therefore the amount of time committed to them varies. However, each project tries to collect information and report on the findings twice a year. The monitoring schedule is adapted continually as other methodologies are integrated. For example, in the municipality of Suscal, the local management team of the 'Strategic Planning of the Canton' is beginning to set up a Prospective Simulation with the support of a GIS, that is based on the indicator data collected through the RRA transects and interviews. In Otavalo, the team managing the project 'Integrated Management of the San Pablo Lake Watershed' is using cultural models from pre-Incan times to show impacts.

In the evaluation phase at the end of the project, there is no attempt to attribute clear causal relationships between the project and perceived impacts. Instead, it involves recognising the synergy between different local groups and how their participation has contributed to impacts. Methods used include individual interviews with organisations, institutions and key individuals using a questionnaire based on some of the indicators. There is also a 'consensus workshop' at which the different groups interpret the findings, using triangulation and strategic analysis.

The process of training in the SISDEL methodology varied from one context to the next. In Bolivar, where planning is institutionalised, SISDEL was used as part of project implementation to integrate health, education, and natural resource management. In Guacamote municipality, where there is no

planning and little related knowledge amongst the leaders, it was a more systematic process to strengthen natural resource management in the long term, based on joint (municipality and community organisations) forestry enterprises.

The compilation and dissemination of impacts in the monitoring and evaluation stages is carried out by the local team with support from COMUNIDEC facilitators. This process aims to identify the main project management lessons and documents these for further learning. Two methods were used for dissemination: publications co-ordinated by an Ecuadorian network, '*Grupo Democracia y Desarrollo Local*', and ongoing higher-level training based on documentation for leaders, technical staff and other people involved in local development.

• **Lessons learnt**

Our experiences with SISDEL have given us three main insights about the preconditions necessary for successful participatory monitoring and evaluation of local collaborative development.

First, assuming that a local leader/facilitator drives the collaborative process, it is crucial that local authorities make a clear commitment for the entire project cycle. The more innovative municipal councils recognise very well the strategic value of participatory monitoring and evaluation methods, as it can help them make timely assessments of their activities and share this with different local audiences. Where these local institutions or municipalities do not exist, then SISDEL can stimulate local development and help strengthen local institutions. In either case, it is essential to identify which organisations have the greatest capacity to lead, monitor and evaluate collaborative local development projects.

Second, we recommend that, where possible, projects take place within a development strategy that builds on existing public policies. If a project is proposed without a clear strategy, action can remain very local and of short duration. Monitoring and evaluation of a project that has no strategic direction can fail to fit in with local resources and needs.

Building on an existing strategy can shorten the project formulation phase. Yet where it is absent, project formulation might well prove an effective way to argue for a strategic plan.

Third, collective learning is the foundation of people's adoption of a new methodology. Within this type of monitoring and evaluation approach, separating experts, organisations, and local people simply hinders the exchange of information and experiences, and prevents the creation of a common understanding that is the root of learning. Further, methodological innovation will only happen if different disciplines are brought together, and a continual exchange between outsiders' and local experiences throughout the project cycle is encouraged.

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