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Sustainable Development Observatories in Manizales, Colombia

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Introduction

Local government in Colombia has come a long way in promoting environmental awareness and citizen and institutional participation in local sustainable development planning processes. There are several valuable experiences underway, namely Local Agenda 21s, Local Environmental Action Plans and innovative Sustainable Development Observatories.

In practice, organising local government, other local institutions, and citizens in the promotion of integrated management required for sustainable development is not easy. In fact, technical staff in charge of designing citywide plans were unable to fully engage the community. For this reason, new methods of coordinating with the community were developed. User-friendly information and monitoring systems in the municipalities have become a new and effective methodological tool for local sustainable development. Citizens have been more attracted to public life and motivated to engage in improving the quality of life of their street, neighbourhood, town, city, and municipality once they have taken part in the processing of updated and accurate information that affects their lives.

The Sustainable Development Observatories in Manizales, Colombia are an example of shared management and citizen participation in local sustainable development. In practice, the successful development of the Observatories has

been due to the active participation of the city municipality, universities, trade unions, institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community organisations. The technological, economic, and information support they have provided have been essential to the advancement of the project. This support has undoubtedly enabled many of the economic, social, and environmental programmes and projects in Manizales to be carried out.

The observatories in Manizales are basically a monitoring system designed as a support system for local urban governance. Their main features are regularly updated economic, social, and environmental indicators formulated with citizen participation and updated by technical support staff. They are available to citizens, who are encouraged to permanently evaluate the achievements of the social, economic, and environmental programmes and projects carried out by the Municipal Development Plan, and participate in its monitoring and implementation. In this way, the information that the university and research centres produce about the municipality is easily transmitted to the community through user-friendly methods, especially the project's most visible and appealing feature, the Quality of Life Traffic Lights.

These Quality of Life Traffic Lights are located in strategic locations around the city, in order to raise awareness and interest in the Local Environmental Action Plans and motivate

citizens to take part in their ongoing monitoring process. The electronic billboards display the quality of social, economic, and environmental indicators for the city's eleven districts or neighbourhoods, under a familiar, distinctly urban symbol (traffic lights) and colour scheme (green, yellow and red).

Objectives

The Sustainable Development Observatories in the Manizales municipality aim to fulfil the following specific objectives:

- support sustainable development planning and management with an information system, which pools economic, social, and environmental data;
- encourage the management and efforts of the local government in fulfilling the policies of the Development Plan and facilitate the objective analysis of the indicator results in order to monitor and define ongoing programmes and projects;
- fittingly provide the required information on the city sustainable development performance for use in the planning process;
- share knowledge with all sectors of the community by means of user-friendly Quality of Life Traffic Lights which illustrate comprehensive indicators that accurately reflect the city level of sustainable development;
- permanent monitoring of the programmes and projects of the Municipal Development Programme: the Biomanizales;
- increase the range of participation of the citizens in the programmes and projects according to the Local Agenda 21: the Bioplan; and
- give priority to the shared urban management to coordinate and execute common interest projects in order to create a dynamic planning process and greater institutional involvement.

Frequently asked questions and answers

What is a Sustainable Development Observatory?

The Observatories are the physical locations where the community has access to social, economic and environmental information. They are strategically located in high-density and appealing places throughout the city so that local residents can see them. In order to strengthen the community management capabilities needed to make good use of the Observatories, the universities are providing training programmes for community organisations, trade unions, and institutions. Furthermore, environmental education sessions are carried out in the Observatories themselves.

Who manages and administrates the Observatories?

The municipal government is the essential leader of the

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project. Additionally, government authorities have provided technical, human, and financial resources for the management of the Observatories. However, the strong precedent of shared leadership between the municipality and the university in Manizales has allowed for joint governance.

Who designed the Observatories system?

The system was designed by a technical team of municipal employees and researchers from the Environmental Studies Institute of the Colombian National University and the Independent University of Manizales, both acknowledged for their commitment to local sustainable development. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) also technically assisted the design. As a test for the design the technical group implemented a prototype launched in the community awareness phase of the project.

Why is inter-institutional coordination vital for the running of the Observatories?

Consensus building between institutions is absolutely necessary for the implementation of the Observatories because implementation is based on the information supplied by institutions on national, regional, and local levels. By means of a formal agreement with the municipality, these partners commit to making economic, technical, and logistical contributions. However, local government leadership is inherently fundamental to the signing of Cooperation Convention meetings.

How do Observatories seek to promote participatory citizenship education?

By increasing local citizen knowledge about city economic, social, and environmental conditions, the Observatories seek to increase citizen interest and engagement in the Municipal Development Plan's promotion of sustainable development projects and programmes. By promoting active study groups

in each district and the participation of support committees, district action committees, local management committees, and the different economic sectors, trade unions, institutions, and NGOs, the citizen education projects are increasing citizen participation. When the results of the quality of life indicators of the municipality, district, and neighbourhoods are published, the Observatories become citizen participation venues.

Who is leading the Observatories' community education process?

The process is being led by the secretary of District Development and the Institute of Municipal Training, with the support of the universities registered in the Biomanizales Cooperation Convention. Some experienced NGOs that work in the various district-specific population participation programmes are also involved.

How do the indicators reach people?

The system is made up of factors, variables, and indicators that will be processed by sophisticated computer software specially designed for the project. The design includes a set of technical tools that will allow for speedy adjustments to indicators and their periodic evaluation, as well as convenient monitoring of the most fundamental variables. Nevertheless, the system has been especially geared to be equally accessible to the general population and specialists. During the design process, indicators were selected in order to compare the levels of sustainable development between city districts or communes, as well as between Colombian or other Latin America cities. Manizales citizens are now able to track the qualitative changes in their commune and city through the electronic traffic lights as well as through indicator software set up at the observatory venues.

How will the quality of the municipality's sustainable development be displayed?

The Quality of Life Traffic Light System developed by the National University of Manizales will be used; the same system used by the municipality to make continuous environmental and social evaluations. Due to its simplicity, this methodology has been employed in many other cities in the country.

Who is involved in the running of the Observatories?

The involvement of the municipal government is crucial. For this reason it was incorporated into the Development Plan proposals as a management tool. It is essential for the planning offices of the municipality and *corpocaldas*, the support-

ing institutions, the trade unions, and the organised community to commit themselves according to their interests and capabilities. In this way, it is absolutely necessary that during the process only those groups that will support the local government leadership in the objective evaluation of the programmes and projects and those that will supply appropriate information for the analysis of the indicators be brought together.

Who will support the running of the Observatories?

Initially, the necessary financial resources will be allocated from the municipality's budget, although specific projects and programmes will need backing from other local, regional, and national resources, as well as international technical assistance. Likewise, it is vital to quantify the technical potential and human resources available in the municipality, as well as the information resources they provide. Currently, the National University, the Independent University, the Ministry of Environment, and Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) have agreed to participate.

Understanding the political culture of the participating population.

It is important to note that political action taken by the urban population should reaffirm their leading role in the system and their importance in the local community. At the same time, comprehensive work must be carried out in order for the municipal Development Plans to serve as tools to consolidate a political culture associated with the participating population. Feasible projects and programmes that also encourage political participation and membership should be incorporated in the Observatories.

What is the role of the Area Council of Municipal Planning?

The Area Council of Municipal Planning is the highest representative of civilian society in the shared planning processes, which is why its leadership is fundamental to the project. Here it is urged to form links with the Assembly and actively participate in familiarising itself with the project.

What are the community leaders' roles?

Any real possibility of establishing permanent observatories greatly depends on the role of the community in its running of them. Due to the shared management of the observatories it is important to stress that the leaders of the community who have previously backed the increase in social awareness of the Districts, are involved from the Familiarisation Phase of the project onwards. Likewise, this phase involves defining the appropriate participation mechanisms

for the different members (the government, institutions, and citizens).

Will there be monitoring and evaluation of the Observatories?

The running of the Observatories must be evaluated, which entails monitoring them with management indicators. This is a definitive phase for the objectives of the Observatories. In this sense, it is necessary to maintain up-to-date information on the municipality and continue permanent monitoring of its condition. At the same time any changes made in the implementation of the Municipal Development Plan should be made as well as establishing indicators to allow better control of management processes that are promoted and developed with the technical cooperation of local, national, or international institutions.

The challenge: the permanent operation of the Observatories

The running of the Sustainable Development Observatories in Manizales depends to a large extent on the way in which population participation is mobilised and how the community role is defined in the planning and leadership of the Municipal Development Plan's programmes and projects. In this sense, it is clear that the role of local government institutions in Manizales must be increased in order to develop the Observatories as an important part of a methodology that catalyses the total involvement of government institutions with the population.

The permanent status of the Observatories and qualitative changes in the long run is for the sustainability indicators to reveal if the quality of life in the municipality is increasing or decreasing. They should also point out whether the municipal government (through the implementation of

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programmes and projects) is meeting the current and future demands and desires of the population, in terms of resource allocation. For this reason the Development Plan has the task of integrating, in a more balanced way, economic, social, and environmentally beneficial programmes and projects, in order to extensively increase the population's quality of life.

It is also important that complementary community training be carried out simultaneously to allow for the Observatories' optimum performance. Furthermore it is essential that the set of technical tools is included in the process to allow easy adjustment of the indicators for convenient and efficient sustained evaluation.

Likewise, the number Observatories that the system can tolerate, not just from the technical point of view, but also from the ability to inspire population participation, is key. It is also important that the Observatories are accessible, user-friendly, and facilitate population participation in the short- and medium-term objectives of the Development Plan. In a process of permanent and participatory planning, there should be periodical control and monitoring of the more critical areas in order to define, together with the community, comprehensive and concrete measures and planning.

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