

## **Findings Brief**

# **External Review of a Community of Practice Development Project on Ecohealth in Latin America and the Caribbean**

*This findings brief is based on the “COPEH-TLAC: Advancing Ecohealth in Latin America” evaluation study by Terri Willard and Jacobo Finkelman, November 2009.*

The evaluation study sought to document how strategic leadership and management functions performed during the first phase of support to the project “Community of Practice on Ecohealth—Toxics in Latin America and the Caribbean (COPEH-TLAC)”; assess how these processes and structures served the COPEH in Phase 1; consider how future growth may lead to adapting these functions; and determine any additional guidelines and plans for the coordinating committee to put in place.

### **1. Ecohealth Program Aims**

IDRC and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) requested proposals for a Community of Practice on Ecohealth that met the following objectives:

1. Build excellence in ecohealth research by developing and testing strategies for capacity building that deepen researchers and stakeholders’ understanding of concepts; develop knowledge and skills in research methodology; and provide expertise in the design and implementation of interventions that respond to local level demand.
2. Facilitate communications within Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) on ecohealth research by supporting individual and group learning and the exchanges of information and knowledge through multiple dynamic formats (including Web sites, electronic forums, brokering individual and inter-institutional relationships), and national, regional, and international workshops and meetings).
3. Link ecohealth research to policy and practice by building capacity of scientists and practitioners in designing and carrying out policy-relevant research on human health and the environment, and developing and testing strategies that effectively target and engage decision-makers and stakeholders at multiple scales based on project and program results.

### **2. Methodology of Evaluation Study**

The evaluation team combined desk reviews and interviews with selected actors. Key documents included progress and final project reports, Web site material, and reports of meetings. In addition to field visits to Heredia (Costa Rica), Montreal, and Brasilia (Brazil), the evaluation team used telephone and skype to interview stakeholders, including IDRC project officers and managers, COPEH-TLAC coordination committee members, node leaders, Community of Practice members, and relevant policy- and decision-makers in LAC.

### **3. Review Findings**

COPEH-TLAC successfully created a Community of Practice that met members' needs for mutual support and learning. At their initial meeting in Chile, members agreed to combine their complementary proposals to compete for the COPEH-TLAC. This spirit of collaboration was prevalent throughout the project.

Members reported their success was partially due to their ability to harness the strengths of the North (the capacity to measure, evaluate and write) with those of the South (extensive experience in vital social processes associated with the ecosystem approach). The evaluation team stressed the importance of monitoring whether this sense of collective ownership continued in the second phase.

#### **3.1 Socio-economic and political environment**

External socio-economic and political realities will have both positive and negative consequences on phase 2 of COPEH-TLAC. On the one hand, stronger democratic practices will open up spaces for ecohealth principles and projects at both the local and international levels. On the other, the profound economic crisis may reduce the availability of local funds for research; as a result, unless COPEH-TLAC strengthens efforts to diversify its funding base and strategic partnerships, it may end up even more dependent on IDRC funding.

#### **3.2 Effectiveness**

Over the last four years, COPEH-TLAC has successfully created a Community of Practice that meets members' needs for mutual support and learning. Members pointed to a spirit of collaboration that has given space for respectful participation from both North and South. Many members have begun to integrate knowledge and activities into their work. The team also evaluated achievements of specific objectives:

##### **3.2.1 Build excellence in ecohealth research**

Nodal working committees targeted the integration of ecohealth concepts and methods into ongoing research on health and environment in their sub-regions to facilitate experimentation with ecohealth and as a means to expand the membership. COPEH held workshops with researchers who wanted to introduce ecohealth elements into their research. Horizontal exchanges increased among the membership, while outreach activities also expanded the ecohealth approach beyond COPEH-TLAC.

##### **3.2.2 Facilitate communications and networking**

COPEH-TLAC has focused on integrating relevant practitioners, researchers, and policymakers into its community. In addition to workshops and other events, COPEH-TLAC shared knowledge through conferences and contact with individuals. Nodal coordinators also spread awareness of eco-health approaches to non-COPEH members.

Knowledge of COPEH-TLAC varied among funding agencies, but most expressed some interest in learning more about the potential outcomes.

### 3.2.3 Link ecohealth research to policy and practice

COPEH-TLAC was nearly universally appreciated for promoting and improving research capacity and research design to tackle health and environment problems. Perspectives differed within the leadership and its membership, however, on its role and capacity in linking research to policy. Some members believed individuals should pursue policy work on their own, and restrict themselves to their own countries, or even state or municipality. Others recognized the importance of sub-regional and regional approaches to policy influence, but lacked conceptual tools and expertise in how to address this. The review team noted that while COPEH-TLAC has had limited impact on national policy in Mexico, some individual members of the Mexican node (including those financed by IDRC) have influenced policy and decision-making.

Generally, there was consensus that outcomes were positive but limited, and that the COPEH needs to engage with actors beyond academia (e.g. decision-makers, policy actors and program managers) to achieve stronger results.

### 3.2.4 Differences in perception

IDRC and COPEH-TLAC leaders agreed the project had met expectations, but had somewhat different perceptions on priorities and expected results.

COPEH-TLAC emphasized building a strong core community and facilitating formal and informal capacity building. Regional coordination teams, rather than a centralized secretariat, spearheaded activities. In this way, they sought to ground the community in local contexts, and to enable academics, policymakers, and practitioners to connect directly.

For its part, IDRC did not dictate a desired size, composition, or management structure for the community, but rather left the COPEH project team to determine them according to regional needs and realities. IDRC appreciates and supports innovative efforts towards achieving desired outcomes and maintains modest expectations for achievements—so long as learning is taking place.

## **Structure, Governance, and Internal processes of the COPEH**

### 3.3.1 Values

COPEH-TLAC's guiding values have three clear sources:

- Ecohealth Domain—individual members pursued research that transcends disciplines, respects social equity, and is gender sensitive and participatory.

- Union and worker coop movements—many leaders brought a strong base in grassroots research, as well as collective-oriented education and governance.
- LAC networking cultures—these tend to have strong inter-personal relations.

Some members expressed a preference to work with others who accepted the following values: competence; sharing, cross-fertilization and multilateral support; openness; bottom-up collective decision-making; antiquity (enabling existing members to decide who can join the community); gender equality; autonomy; and equality of parts.

### 3.3.2 Membership

The exact number of members was unclear. Rather than a formal membership list, COPEH-TLAC relies on individuals to affiliate voluntarily. The membership, however, significantly increased from its original 13 to more than 150. In 2007, membership included individuals from 84 organizations. Of the 177 persons on COPEH lists, 46 percent belonged to a research organization; 31 percent to a government institution; and 23 percent from civil society. They came from 20 countries and various disciplines.

Members participated by aligning activities with COPEH-TLAC's values on ecohealth; using the community to add value to their own work; and helping to maintain and expand the community. Since the community's inception, membership has operated through six regional nodes: Canada, LAC, Mexico, Brazil, Cono Sur, and Andean Region.

In Phase I, members adopted a decentralized approach. Strong sub-regional node committees were supported by a central coordination committee comprised of representatives from each node. Each node had three levels, or "rings," of members. While different nodes apply the "ring" concept differently, some common applications have developed, including the following:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> ring—the central coordinating committee (CCC)—has two members from each node who represent their node in decision-making and organize nodal and transversal activities.
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> ring comprises members of the nodal working committees, including researchers, decision-makers, local networks, and organizations working on environment, public health, and sustainable development issues.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> ring comprises people who are directly or indirectly in contact with rings 1 and 2 such as participants in regional workshops organized by nodal working committees.

Some countries had more exposure to ecohealth approaches than others, as well as greater academic capacity. This led to different recruitment strategies. As a result, membership was highly uneven between nodes, both in terms of numbers and diversity. Overall, 48 percent of the community were women. Evidence suggested few youth were members or active on working committees; a new partnership with the Ecohealth Students Network of

the International Society for Ecology and Health may bring more young researchers into the community in Phase II.

### 3.3.3 Management

Both IDRC and COPEH-TLAC leaders considered the decentralized approach of six nodes a success. Activities and decisions occurred at both the regional and nodal levels, but created heavy workloads for CCC members who managed their node and contributed to the broader regional program. Key decisions took place at three levels: strategic decisions made by the CCC in concert with nodes about the community's direction; tactical decisions made by the CCC to ensure nodes are in sync; and operational decisions made by four committees (Web communications, budget matters, evaluation, and consolidation).

Nodes operated largely in an autonomous fashion. Initially, coordinators made most of the decisions, but working groups took on greater responsibilities. Generally, the nodal level was in charge of strategic planning and visioning; membership; international and external communications; financial and contractual management; and monitoring and evaluation within each sub-region. Some community management was undertaken at the regional level. Stakeholders acknowledged the COPEH-TLAC Web site was out of date, requiring a complete redesign to make it less complex and easier to update.

## 3.4 Efficiency

The evaluation team found it difficult to assess efficiency since COPEH-TLAC was breaking new ground. Rather than a standard implementation of an existing networking model—or one in which the network is an end in itself—COPEH-TLAC sought to contribute towards an emerging field of transdisciplinary research for development. For that reason, IDRC did not specify targets for each outcome since it had no real idea of what could be achieved under what timeframe.

COPEH-TLAC has managed resources frugally, but its preference for face-to-face meetings over electronic networking tools has severely constrained activities. Greater time and resources were needed for core research, and sharing knowledge systematically online.

## 3.5 Sustainability

Evaluators identified the three issues below as key to sustainability in the evolving context for international development:

*Resources:* To ensure sustainability, COPEH-TLAC needs to diversify its donor base.

*Relationships:* Internally, COPEH-TLAC has fostered much trust between the first and second rings. To broaden relationships with external partners, including potential funders, the community needs to promote its potential more effectively.

*Relevance:* Members maintained individual relationships with numerous national, regional, and global donors. While this provided a solid base of knowledge of donor trends, COPEH-TLAC must move beyond benefits for individual members and capitalize on the knowledge collectively to stay relevant.

#### **4. Recommendations**

The review team recommended that IDRC take the initiative to share its own frameworks and understanding of networks, policy influence, capacity development, communications, and evaluation with COPEH-TLAC. The team also identified several issues for consideration in Phase II by the community:

##### 4.1 Review governance

COPEH-TLAC may wish to distinguish between decision-making around the project and governance of the community as a whole, taking strategic steps to develop the latter. Specific issues to consider include: values and mission; optimum membership size and composition; terms of reference for nodal and sub-nodal coordinators; relationship of sub-nodes to regional working committees; primacy of geography in governance; responsibility of nodes and sub-nodes for fundraising; benefits and responsibilities of 3<sup>rd</sup> ring members; relationship between LAC members of the Ecohealth Students Network and COPEH-TLAC.

##### 4.2 Revisit communications culture

Consider how electronic communications might support a broader communications strategy. Distinguish between tools to support internal and external communications. Explore Web communications for systemizing and sharing knowledge. Review Web design during transfer of site design/management to the Institute for Studies on Toxic Substances at the National University of Costa Rica (IRET-UNA). Reflect on Web presence across multiple platforms rather than simply using the Web site.

##### 4.3 Strengthen understanding and communications with respect to policy influence

Consider whether applying IDRC's policy-influencing framework might help COPEH-TLAC to understand and communicate its policy orientation. Reflect on the need to build capacity of members to understand formal and informal policy processes. Explore whether research and policy influence, as well as universal themes such as mining and pesticides, provide a venue for stronger collective policy influence.

##### 4.4 Strengthen monitoring and evaluation

Before pursuing its social network analysis, COPEH-TLAC should consider developing a broader monitoring and evaluation framework:

- *Adopt an outcomes-oriented approach.* The structured progress markers within the Outcome Mapping approach could allow for more formal sharing with donors and partners. A phased-in approach is recommended (general progress markers for members followed one to two years later by progress markers for boundary partners who are not community members).
- *Move toward sustainability.* Monitor factors underlying community resources, relationships, and relevance.