

Citizen Participation and Environmental Management

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Mexico City - the largest city in the world and the oldest in North America - is one of the great cultural capitals of the Western Hemisphere. But the daunting environmental problems facing its 20 million inhabitants - severe air pollution, a sinking water table, and chronic water shortages - present the government of Cuauhtémoc Cardenas Solorzano with an enormous challenge.

Since taking office in December 1997, Mexico's first democratically-elected city administration has been attempting to establish a sustainable mega-city that involves citizens in a meaningful way.

Recognizing that Mexico City isn't alone in facing this challenge, the Environment Secretariat of the Cardenas government, under Alejandro Encinas, joined forces with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to compare notes and build linkages with other cities.

For three days in November, the government of Mexico City hosted a conference, co-sponsored by IDRC, on Social Participation in the Management of the Urban Environment. Representatives from 10 Latin American countries - Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, Peru, and Uruguay - gathered in the historic Museo de la Ciudad de Mexico to discuss how citizen participation can improve environmental management.

The fact that approximately 90% of the world's population growth in the next three decades will be concentrated in urban areas imbued the meeting with a sense of urgency. Everyone was well aware that this population crisis will place unprecedented stresses on the institutional, infra-structural, and natural resources of cities.

But cities - teeming with huge reserves of human resources - also hold the key to solving many social and environmental problems. In fact, without the active involvement of citizens, government efforts to preserve the integrity of urban ecosystems may well be doomed.

As Carlos Seré, IDRC's Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, noted: "Development isn't just a technical issue, it's a social issue. Sustainability can only be established with the participation of all."

This statement struck a chord that was repeated until it became a theme throughout the entire conference. Federal and local civil servants, representatives of NGOs, and academics repeatedly picked it up as they recounted their experiences in attempting to involve citizens in environmental concerns. Claudio Langone, Director of Environmental Initiatives for [Porto Alegre](#), described the process that Brazilian city went through to save its water supply.

In 1989, he said, water pollution had reached a crisis point. In fact, the situation was so severe, city hall officials recognized they had no choice but to involve citizens in the recovery of the Guaiba River. Four principles drove the agenda, said Langone.

- A holistic focus: Recognizing that saving the river was an integral part of the city's social and economic progress;

- Global thinking and local action: Employing techniques that respected regional peculiarities;
- Community participation: Naming the problem and seeking the solutions together;
- Integrated management concept: Creating four environmental programs capable of building an ecologically and socially-affordable model.

These programs deal with environmental sanitation, urban planning and landscape planning, sustainable development and environmental education.

Mexico City's Encinas, argued that to be sustainable, cities must develop in ways that are inclusionary. "Social equity and solidarity, cultural identity, education, institutional capacity building, and citizen participation are key determinants in achieving sustainable and equitable urban environmental management."

During his 24 years in politics, Canada's Michael Harcourt learned a lot about citizen participation. The former mayor of Vancouver, British Columbia, and chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Canada's [National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy](#), put it succinctly: "There are three ways elected officials can involve local citizens," he said, "and two of them are bad. The third can be successful, but is risky unless all the conditions are met."

The first approach is an expert-driven, top-down one that typically asks citizens to comment on plans already engraved in stone. The "blank sheet" approach best describes the second. Leaders abdicate their role and present people with no plans, no background. Instead, they rely on the spontaneous wisdom of the grassroots to express itself.

The third approach, said Harcourt, is a process in which politicians and experts partner with local citizens. But its success depends on good information, solid background, a clear budget, and equally clear options and proposals.

Without doubt, citizen participation is not a straight-forward process. But neither are the issues facing cities. Repeatedly, participants detailed the need for politicians to express the will, not only to address such fundamental problems as environmental pollution and environmental sustainability, but to open the door to citizen involvement.

And citizens cannot be involved in a vacuum. Considerable education is required.

Diana Ponce Nava, General Director of Environmental Projects for the Government of Mexico City, noted that environmental education is happening, but bemoaned the fact that "it is very general. People learn about the ecosystem, the biosphere, ozone layers. These things are important, but are general and isolated. That's why we're creating an Environment Information Centre with specific information which would allow citizens to make informed decisions."

For example, since June, 1998, Mexico City has been operating an information line, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Citizens can phone it and get up-to-the-minute information on air quality conditions.

While this is a beginning, efficient environmental management involves much more. As one of Mexico's leading environmental consultants, Dr. Alberto Szekely, put it: "Opening the door to citizen participation will strengthen institutions. Then we can imagine what the world could be. But we can also envision a backlash if we deprive citizens of these opportunities and continue damaging the environment."

- [Declaration of Mexico Conference](#)
- [Recommendations of Mexico Conference](#)

Sidebars to Main Story:

- [Making Connections: IDRC's Contribution to Citizen Participation & the Environment](#)
- [Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health Workshop](#)
- [Mexican Nongovernmental Organizations Confront the Issues](#)

Links of interest:

- [Speech of Maureen O'Neil, President of IDRC, to the Mexico Conference](#)
- [Environmental Secretariat, Government of Mexico City \(Spanish text\)](#)
- [Centre for Human Settlements](#)
- [Clean Air Initiative in Latin American Cities](#)
- [Cities Feeding People Program \(IDRC\)](#)
- [Agropolis \(IDRC\)](#)