

**REPORT ON THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT,  
HONDURAS**

**BY**

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## I. Structure and Organization

Honduras's National Council for Sustainable Development (CONADES) was established in response to the Agenda 21 mandate adopted at the 1992 UNCED Conference in Rio and the 15th Presidential Summit of Central American leaders that took place October 1994 in Managua, Nicaragua. At the Managua summit, Central America's presidents created the Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development (CAASD), "an initiative that will establish policies, programs, and short and long term activities to foster development, individual and collective attitudes, and actions at regional, national and local levels, and move toward the creation of environmentally, politically, socially, and culturally sustainable societies."

In response to these commitments, the government of Honduras created CONADES by executive order in 1994. In 1997 a further decree broadened the council's membership and further defined its mandate, and established its executive secretariat. This order, however, did not define the nomination process for civil society representatives, which remains unclear.

Currently, CONADES has 22 members. Of these members, 12 represent the public sector and 10 represent academia, private business, and environmental organizations. The president of Honduras acts as the head of the council and the presidential delegate to the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD) acts as the coordinator. The executive orders permit the creation of sub-groups or committees to address specific issues. These committees can submit their recommendations to the president for implementation or to the larger council for debate and approval.

Day to day activities are managed by the executive secretariat of CONADES, whose director is appointed by the president. The secretariat is responsible for implementing council resolutions and monitoring progress of their implementation. At present, the secretariat is staffed by three national experts, one international advisor and support personnel.

CONADES has the following broad mandates:

- i) to advise the government and president on development policies and strategies,
- ii) to coordinate monitoring of sustainable development activities,
- iii) to monitor presidential summit agreements within its jurisdiction,
- iv) to implement CAASD and Agenda 21 agreements,
- v) to promote policy reforms, laws , programs and projects related to sustainable development, and
- vi) to function as a forum for the exchange of ideas and information.

## II. The Executive Commission for Sustainable Development (COEDES): Seeds of Success

Since its inception, CONADES has actively participated in fora on sustainable development and is on its way to becoming the focal point for a national dialogue on the issue. CONADES, together with other organizations, has sponsored a variety of public events including, a workshop on the definition of sustainable development indicators, national consultations to define Honduras's position at the Rio+5 meeting and the Bolivia Summit, and meetings with decision makers and leaders to bring attention to the investment opportunities provided by environmental projects. CONADES also provided technical and financial support for the creation of an office on joint implementation and the formulation of the Executive Decree that created this office.

CONADES has been most effective, however, in creating partnerships with various governmental agencies and civil society organizations. These partnerships have supported grassroots organizations to advance sustainable development at regional, municipal and local levels, and worked in line with reform efforts to decentralize government functions and strengthen municipal administrations.

The clearest example of such a partnership is the collaboration between CONADES and the Ministry of Justice and Government in the creation and operation of the Executive Commission for Sustainable Development (COEDES). COEDES functions as a coordinating mechanism at the national level, but also organizes and promotes multi-stakeholder councils at regional and local levels: Departmental Commissions for Sustainable Development, Municipal Development Councils and Community Development Councils. These bodies coordinate sustainable development at their respective levels by encouraging the active participation of different social actors in defining and setting development priorities.

In the course of creating and carrying out the work of the Executive Commission for Sustainable Development, CONADES employed at least four best practices discussed at the Rio+5 meeting of more than 80 National Sustainable Development Councils (NCSD) or similar entities: (a) it acted as an integrator; (b) promoted participation; (c) demonstrated the value of sustainable development; and (d) supported local action. How CONADES, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice and Government, developed these best practices is discussed in greater detail below.

### A. Working as an Integrator and Developing an Inter-Sectoral Vision

As one of its first responsibilities, COEDES reviewed three draft laws with potentially wide ranging impacts at all territorial levels: the Territorial Decentralization and Diversification Law, the Municipal Development Law, and the Land Use and Human Settlements Law. As part of the review, a consensus process was used to incorporate environmental, economic and social concerns into the proposed legislation. At the same time, political structures where decision making, planning, management and monitoring occur were modified. These modifications were

designed to help integrate sustainable development into national policy making as well as the regional or global commitments assumed by the Honduran government. They were also modified to ensure consistency among legal instruments, and to permit the participation of relevant stakeholders. Two of these bills are currently under consideration by the Honduran legislature and, if approved, will be the first legal instruments to incorporate sustainability criteria in their formulation.

## **B. Promoting Civil Society Participation and Demonstrating Sustainable Development**

The Executive Commission of CONADES promotes effective partnerships between public and private institutions through education, communication and participation. CONADES takes advantage of existing coordinating mechanisms or structures, and acts as a facilitator that ensures they function effectively as dialogue and decision-making forums. The ability of CONADES to shape these structures is reflected in how local or municipal governments have modified their own decision-making processes. Specific examples include:

(i) linking and integrating important but previously passive actors into decision-making processes; and (ii) mobilizing untapped resources to carry out social or economic activities that enjoy a high degree of consensus, are considered a priority for action, and address environmental concerns.

An example of the above is the way in which the Executive Commission succeeded in piloting a local model for sustainable development. Because of its resource limitations, the Commission evaluated a number of states and municipalities to select one locality as a pilot. Following pre-established criteria, the Valle Department (equivalent of a state or district), and five of its municipalities were selected. As a first step, observations were made of the existing roles, operation and behavior of different private and public programs, and of participation levels in multi-stakeholder councils at the departmental, municipal and community levels.

Two meetings with sitting mayors as well as mayoral candidates representing four major political parties (elections were in progress) were held to explain the proposed model and to disseminate the findings gathered from the observations made in the initial stage. In addition, a broader meeting, "The First Meeting of Departmental Actors," was organized to discuss a sustainable development strategy for the region. This meeting was attended by 65 public and private organizations, and agreement was reached to develop and promote a single integrated development strategy that would consolidate and build on the principles of participatory democracy.

A concrete outcome of these open fora and multi-stakeholder meetings was a notable change in attitudes on the part of public and private development institutions towards the community and vice versa. These attitudinal changes and increases in communication are building a consensus regarding reforms of local development programs and projects. In many cases, changes are now made in direct response to community priorities and concerns.

### **C. Building Ownership for Sustainable Development at the Local Level**

In response to the positive experience in the Valle Department, mayors from all over the country who attended the first meeting of the Honduran Association of Municipalities adopted the following decision:

To design and implement local municipal strategies to support sustainable development and achieve the following objectives:

- Foster participatory planning processes that engage all interest groups residing in the municipality.
- Ensure that municipal authorities act as leaders in harmonizing various social interests and economic sectors.
- Develop strategies for municipal development which balance public and private development.
- Facilitate strong citizen participation that is not tied to state or public assistance.
- Create mixed (public and private) structures that coordinate and maximize municipal development efforts and increase the potential for sustainability.
- Identify and validate the resources and assets found in the municipality and its representative groups.
- Channel technical assistance from CONADES and the COEDES to increase the capacity of municipalities to implement sustainable development models and strategies.

This decision is a very encouraging stimulus for CONADES, but also poses a challenge to its currently limited financial and technical resources.

## **III. Continuing Challenges and Opportunities**

### **A. Mainstreaming Sustainable Development within National Policy Debates**

The main sustainable development issue under debate within the Honduran society is the need to reduce widespread economic inequities and social divisions. In effect, it is a debate about the need to diminish a long accumulated social debt that has resulted in inferior education, inadequate health care, under-investment in housing infrastructure, limited access to justice, food insecurity, absence of social safety nets, undefined land and resource tenure and deterioration of the natural resource base. The interests of different segments of society are at play in all these issues, so they

are at the center of the government's agenda, and transcend CONADES' authority.

Honduras's newly elected administration plans to create a National Conciliation Forum that will engage a wide number of political and social groups to reconcile competing interests, rationalize government policies and structures and create a space for citizen participation and input that will build public policy consensus around how to address the problems generated by the accumulated social debt. This development represents both a challenge and an opportunity for CONADES; if it acts effectively, the council can catalyze a national debate and present sustainable development as an important paradigm or framework to guide the discussions of the Conciliation Forum. The prominence of these issues in the current administration's agenda also creates an opportunity to incorporate environmental concerns and to examine their compatibility with the country's social and economic development path.

## **B. Balancing and Strengthening Membership**

A continuing challenge facing CONADES is the imbalance in the composition of the social groups that have been invited to become members. Several important social groups, particularly those representing women and indigenous or ethnic communities, have been obviously overlooked in the current membership. In addition, most of the existing members have a limited knowledge of sustainable development issues or range of government commitments in this area. Often it is difficult for members of the council, many of who are cabinet secretaries, to keep abreast of all the internal government processes that relate to the promotion of sustainable development. This points to the need for several changes. First, a need to incorporate additional social actors, like the ones mentioned earlier, into the council. Second, provision of some basic training on sustainable development for leaders and decision makers. Finally, the creation of an advisory body that can aid or support the Executive Secretariat in the implementation of council decisions.

## **C. Ensuring the Long-Term Financial Viability**

The initial operations of CONADES' executive secretariat received financial support from the United Nations Development Program. Currently, the secretariat receives technical and financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) as part of a five-year project, "Support for Sustainable Natural Resource Management in Honduras," which began in April 1997. This project funds a long-term advisor for five years and short-term consultants to carry out activities specified in CONADES' work plan. The Honduras-Canada Environment Management Fund is also supporting CONADES through an institutional strengthening project that will cover payroll and operational expenses over a four-year period. Additional technical and financial support is provided by the "Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development Implementation Support" project also funded by CIDA through the Central American Commission for Environment and Development. Finally, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), through its Public Sector Reform Program, will fund the development of a strategic plan

for CONADES, as well as a sustainable development information system for decision makers.

CONADES is supported largely by foreign funds (particularly Canadian), which raises the question of its medium and long term financial sustainability. Although an executive decree established that the executive branch would provide a transfer of resources to CONADES, this has not been substantial. Government policies, particularly Ministry of Finance efforts, to reduce government expenditures indicates that national or internal sources of funding will continue to be limited. Thus, CONADES needs to develop a financing strategy for the longer-term. Such a strategy implies a larger commitment by participating members and their representative sectors. Another component of such a strategy might be the creation of a sustainable development fund. The potential benefit of both these approaches is a greater degree of independence, and the capacity to work and analyze sustainable development for the long-term.

#### **D. Leveraging Successful Outreach and Communication Efforts**

To disseminate the results of its work and the importance of sustainable development throughout Honduras, CONADES has created a valuable strategic partnership with the National Sustainable Development Network. This network is part of an international program, sponsored by the UN Development Program, that assists national and international institutions involved in sustainable development to gain access to relevant information. As a result of the partnership, CONADES is disseminating information on its mission, activities and achievements in the following ways: (i) a web page dedicated to CONADES and providing general information on sustainable development in Honduras; (ii) a broadly distributed quarterly newsletter (1,000 issues) that provides updates on-going activities; (iii) a brochure that provides basic organizational information and (iv) a video that introduces and discusses the challenges facing sustainable development in Honduras.

The alliance between the council and the National Sustainable Development Network has been so successful that in January 1997 representatives of the network in the six other Central American nations recommended the creation of similar alliances in their respective countries. However, the challenge for CONADES is to continue to expand and enhance this partnership to help create a demand for policy changes and private efforts that respect and incorporate sustainable development principles. Also, this partnership provides CONADES with a valuable opportunity to inform and educate key groups inside Honduras on how the council can and does address the complex social and economic problems facing the nation.

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