

Partnership in the elaboration of the National Action Plan



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The development of partnership between governments and NGOs, a relatively new phenomenon in Argentina, is the result of increasing democratisation following the fall of dictatorship, fifteen years ago. However, the process of participation has not yet reached all levels. Not all areas of government have put into practice the widely proclaimed participation and partnership between government and civil society.

Reasons for success

In elaborating the National Action Plan against Desertification, the Argentine Government, working through the Soil Conservation Directorate has adopted an open and receptive attitude towards NGOs from the beginning of the process. The NGOs, for their part, have proved to be reliable actors and have been able to offer considerable help without compromising their own positions. This experience has been a success because of three positive factors:

- The Argentine NGOs were able to achieve an efficient mechanism for representation and organisation through the Argentine Chapter of the 'Reseau International de ONG sur le Desertification' (RIOD-Argentina). The result has been that the participation of NGOs has not been limited to one or two privileged institutions. On the contrary, the structure of the network with the democratic election of representatives at national (Asociaci3n on Civil Los Algarrobos), subnational (CENEP, FUNPROVE, AMAD and Fundaci3n

Patagonia Natural) and provincial level has made it possible to develop a transparent structure that has integrated some thirty institutions. In this structure each of the parties is entitled to speak for all in the different consulting instances.

- Conservation Directorate consistently accepted suggestions and proposals from NGOs. It has discussed these openly in many different formal and informal situations. Partnership is not synonymous with equality, but the commitment of working together and preserving the peculiarities and contributions that each can offer has made it possible to enrich the whole process.
- The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) has had a catalysing effect on the Argentine process. Not only because the Convention promotes participation and partnership, but also because the Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee sessions provided a framework that motivated the beginning of collaboration.

The process

The Argentine National Action Plan process was implemented through a participatory methodology involving a significant number of people dealing with the management of natural resources. Farmers, agricultural producers, indigenous communities and technical experts from NGOs worked together with scientific researchers, professors, state officers and political leaders. Thirty preparatory meetings and regional workshops were held in the period 1996-1997. More than 2000 people, representing national, provincial and local government, NGOs, universities, research centers and producers' unions participated actively. The result of this process was a draft document that was discussed at a national plenary meeting where the final text was ratified.

Preconditions

As far as the NGOs were concerned, this process involved some special features.

- In the first place, the political will of the Soil Conservation Directorate should be emphasised. This political will proved essential to obtaining concrete and continuous results.
- Second, the NGOs had the capacity to prepare feasible proposals that avoided sterile rhetoric.
- Another important element is institutionalisation. In the Argentine case, this institutionalisation was achieved through the presence of NGOs in the National Plan Committee. Recently, this institutionalisation has been increased, as NGOs

have accepted positions on the commission that monitors the development of the Programme.

- Finally, it should be emphasised that the partnership between government and NGOs should not be reduced to participating in a couple of plenary meetings once or twice a year. The process shows its real potential in informal and permanent contacts, in consultations on both sides, in the revision and preparation of combined documents and in mutual support.

Only the beginning

It is clear that the work is not over. On the contrary, it is only the beginning and there is still a lot to do. Perhaps the most important thing needed now is time. Time for this partnership to evolve and consolidate, time to face new challenges. But above all time to ensure that today's political will becomes tomorrow's effective state policy. There are still many difficulties that government and NGOs will have to face.

Undoubtedly, the government should take the actions needed to institutionalise the process without delay. In particular the National Desertification Fund should be implemented. This should be an agile mechanism at local level capable of mobilising and channeling enough resources from the national budget. It should also be able to activate international cooperation.

Pending matters

NGOs have still many matters to attend to. Perhaps the most important is to increase the participation of community based groups and poorest farmers and to reinforce public awareness. However, in spite of the fact that there is still much to be done, Argentine NGOs are determined to face the future with hope. The work that has been done so far has allowed us to lay the foundations for a solid collective structure that should enable us to achieve the sustainable development of the drylands. ■

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