



The Road to Harmony: How to Share Resources

IDRC, the University of Peace, and dozens of Latin American researchers explore non-violent ways to settle conflicts over nature.

"Peace is a never-ending process ... It cannot ignore our differences or overlook our common interests. It requires us to work and live together."

— Óscar Arias Sánchez,
Nobel Laureate and President,
Costa Rica

RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

The Development Challenge: Learn from discord

On Ecuador's famed Galapagos Islands, fishers, tourists, and conservationists disagree over whether its fish ought to be fished, or photographed, or simply left alone. At Peru's Machu Picchu citadel, a complex web of shifting interests that includes public institutions, private corporations, porters, tourists — even UNESCO — quarrel over how that fragile site ought to be managed. In Bolivia's Cochabamba, poor residents confront the government and multi-

national corporations in a long-running and sometimes bloody dispute over control of the city's water supply.

And so it has gone for millennia, throughout the planet. While groups have often clashed over

religious or ideological differences, many conflicts have been fought also over the natural resources people need for survival. These disputes may have been confined to a simple war of words, or they may have escalated into violent confrontation.

Once upon a time such "socio-environmental" conflicts were regarded as being somehow embarrassing or regrettable, as though they signaled a failure of normal processes. Lately, however, people have been taking a second look at the positive aspects of these disputes. Clearly, understanding the dynamics of these local dramas can teach lessons about how to resolve future environmental conflicts, but these episodes may also suggest non-violent paths to reconciliation around larger social or cultural differences.

The Idea: Learn from collaboration

In the late 1990s, two institutions became increasingly concerned about the socio-environmental conflicts that were emerging in Latin America: Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the United Nations' University for Peace (UPEACE), located in Costa Rica.

The so-called stakeholders in these natural resource conflicts included governments, local communities, Indigenous groups, corpora-

tions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). To try to settle their differences, many of these stakeholders mustered adversarial techniques such as litigation, civil disobedience, public demonstrations, or outright repression. Activities like these were conducted for the most part in the public eye, and so were "known."

Meanwhile, quieter, collaborative approaches were also being used to mend fences. These methods were less visible and less well understood, and naturally enough they raised questions. For instance, was mediation, negotiation, or reconciliation more likely to lead to success? Would it be more fruitful to appoint, say, a municipal commission or a co-management committee, or to engage in some type of participatory problem solving? To answer such questions, the documentation and analysis of concrete experiences were needed.

IDRC and UPEACE therefore launched an ambitious five-year, two-phase program to gather information about Latin American experiences in socio-environmental conflict resolution where some type of collaborative approach was being tried. The two organizations supported 30 research projects relating to disputes in 11 countries. The program was called Conflict and Collaboration in Managing Natural Resources in Latin America and the Caribbean (or C&C).

The Research: From complexity to clarity

C&C engaged 74 multidisciplinary researchers to tackle a remarkably wide assortment of evolving situations and thorny issues. They examined conflicts that arose as a result of pollution, deforestation, mining and hydroelectric megaprojects, access to or use of protected areas, rural-urban planning and zoning, ownership of traditional lands, and fisheries management.

The program studied interest groups that had clashed over an assortment of ecosystems or "spatial units" — watersheds, coastal zones, Andean highlands, wetlands, protected areas, ethnic or traditional territories, and more. These groups had competed for scarce resources including soil, water, forests, fish, wildlife, salt, oil, copper, and limestone.

Each of the 30 projects pursued its own local lines of inquiry, which meant that, overall, an

"Non-violence is one way of saying that there are other ways to solve problems, not only through weapons and war. Non-violence also means the recognition that the person on one side of the trench and the person on the other side of the trench are both human beings, with the same faculties. At some point they have to begin to understand one another."

— Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Nobel Peace Prize Winner



IDRC: Jean-Marc Fleury



IDRC: Daniel Buckles

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abundant variety of questions were asked and types of information gathered. At the same time, each project sought to understand the factors affecting the resolution of its particular dispute, thus contributing to a consolidated panorama showing which mechanisms worked and which did not.

On the Ground: Theory and practice

An important goal of the C&C program was to involve the interest groups themselves in the investigation process. This type of participatory inquiry or “action research” not only focuses on learning practical lessons, but also on contributing to the resolution of the conflicts even while they are under study. The approach makes the most of the fact that scientific activities like analysis, reflection, and dialogue can also help foster collaboration and reconciliation.

Thus this dynamic program evolved over its long lifespan from theory toward practice — from primarily comprising abstract research proposals toward involvement in the context of actual disputes. Meanwhile the program’s frameworks and assumptions changed too.

Early projects tended to focus on the specific interests or resources at issue. Consequently these undertakings adopted a “conflict management” approach, which favours settling each dispute on its own merits using methods appropriate to the situation. Later projects emphasized the broader power relationships among the contenders. These adopted a “conflict transformation” approach, which favours the longer-term pursuit of fundamental structural or political change. The goal shifted, in other words, from merely getting the fighters to shake hands toward addressing the root cause of their quarrel.

The Impact: Building trust

The 30 projects, conducted in an array of Latin American cultures, produced an abundance of material in print and electronic formats (including a children’s picture book bearing an environmental message). The program’s most significant research yield, however, was its rich classification of information about the different collaborative approaches that people have adopted in attempts to resolve various categories of conflict.



IDRC: Daniel Buckles

As often happens with action research, C&C also had an immediate impact on the ground. The dialogue that is the core of the participatory process contributed to the amelioration of several disputes, for example:

- In Costa Rica’s Tempisque River basin, a local organization and a sugar cane company clashed over the use of land in the watershed. The involvement of a C&C partner helped the community and the corporation settle their disagreement, leading to the declaration of an “Area of Natural Heritage,” which better safeguards the wetlands.
- In the Lurín River Valley south of Lima, at the flashpoint where expanding suburbia encroaches upon countryside, diverse public and private stakeholders collided over whether the valley should be urbanized or kept “green.” Initially, those seeking to preserve the valley held a weaker position, but the C&C partner’s blend of education and dialogue helped restore the power balance. Now, the competing interests have achieved a measure of reconciliation, and have moved toward adopting a shared agenda for the sustainable development of the watershed.
- In Guatemala’s southwest, Indigenous Mayan peoples had long endured official contempt for their desire to manage the forests they occupy — a mindset that led to injustices and tension. In response, the C&C partner hosted a series of participatory encounters between traditional leaders and Guatemala’s environmental regulators. These workshops helped enlighten the public authorities about

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IDRC: Denis Marchand

Indigenous attitudes toward the environment, and led to the creation of the Indigenous Peoples and Civil Society Coordination Unit, which recognizes in law the resource rights of these people.

- And on the coast of Chile, just south of Valparaiso, a fishing village and a privately owned tourist resort competed for access to drinking water. The C&C partner brought together the contending parties with local water administrators in workshops designed to share viewpoints and build trust. As a result of these meetings, the local community obtained the legal rights to the water that they had demanded — a solution that addresses the need for economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social equity.

Overall, the program's findings may challenge some people's notions about how power is wielded. The strong and the weak don't always behave as expected. For example, in a world region where many countries are still coming to terms with the legacy of authoritarian governments, state agencies now tend to favour collaborative approaches. The reason? Governments wish to settle the immediate issues without having to confront their root causes — such as unequal power relations. On the other hand, some NGOs tend to rely in the first instance on adversarial strategies — public protests and street marches, for example — as a way of provoking the dialogue that eventually leads to collaboration.

Future Challenges: Bringing everyone to the table

The C&C program highlighted some larger research issues that still need to be addressed.

Even though techniques such as negotiation, mediation, and so forth will continue to play a role in conflict resolution, clearly another important path will be addressing social inequalities and empowering the weaker players. The best collaborative methods can achieve little if the most vulnerable parties are barred from the table simply because they lack the knowledge or the capacity to contribute effectively.

And while most of these socio-environmental conflicts appear at first glance to be essentially local, often they can be shown to be framed within globalized processes. Too frequently, the “institutionalization of inequity” — for example in unfair trade agreements — is at the root of injustice and environmental damage. Future investigation into these local conflicts will need to look at a wider range of national and institutional actors.

Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is one of the world's leading institutions in the generation and application of new knowledge to meet the challenges of international development. For more than 35 years, IDRC has worked in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

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