

Developing a Local Earth Charter *Municipality of Alajuela, COSTA RICA*

Background

Alajuela is the second largest region in Costa Rica and is inhabited by approximately 238,000 residents. The city has long been concerned about environmental problems affecting the province and this resulted in the creation of a department of Environmental Management. In 2002, the Municipality, inspired by the Earth Charter, moved forward with an initiative to develop an *Earth Charter version for the Municipality of Alajuela*, as well as its local Agenda 21.

Aim

The project had the following main aims:

- Promote the concept and understanding of sustainable development among staff of the municipality and community members.
- Sensitize communal leaders about the interconnectedness between social, political and economic problems.
- Promote a new paradigm of participation, emphasizing community processes of collaboration.
- Develop the Earth Charter and Local Agenda 21 version of Alajuela.

Partners and participants

Partnering with the Municipality of Alajuela, were the Earth Council and the Colegio Universitario de Alajuela (CUNA). Workshops



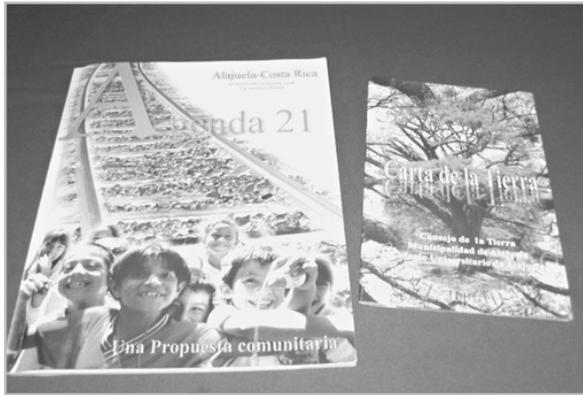
on the topic of sustainable development were provided to 200 municipal employees, representing half the total workforce.

Timeframe

The Municipality of Alajuela executed this project during the last semester of 2002.

Description

The process of developing a local Earth Charter first started with a training session of 200 staff members in order to sensitize participants to the main themes of sustainable development. At the beginning of the training, the term 'sustainable development' was not clearly understood, as participants thought that this term referred to just environmental issues. The Earth Charter was unknown to most



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participants and was used to help clarify the meaning of sustainable development. The 3-hour training sessions clarified the concept of sustainable development, raised awareness on the critical need for a new model of development, and presented the Earth Charter. At this point, the Earth Charter and Agenda 21 became the working tools for participants to develop the local versions of both instruments.

During the workshop, participants identified priority principles that should be part of their Earth Charter and agreed that this version would be simple, short and written in a way that would be easy to remember and grasp by a wide public.

The Earth Charter for the Municipality of Alajuela intended to be a declaration of values to inspire a new sense of responsibility for the Municipality. Once the local Earth Charter was developed, the Municipality disseminated it within the province in order to inspire community awareness and action. To accomplish that, over 500 brochures, as well as calendars and posters were produced and widely distributed.

The second phase of this process involved participants from the different sub-regions who had taken an active role in the design of a strategic plan. Participants were first invited to reflect and discuss the current situation of their

city and province, identify the problems they faced and think of possible solutions. The 4 questions below helped guide the process:

- 1- How would you like to view your district in 30 years?
- 2- What, do you believe, are the main problems in the region?
- 3- What might be the possible solutions to identified problems?
- 4- What ethical values are needed to make sustainable development in your community possible?

Participants were requested to answer the questions individually and then collectively. The most significant achievement was the commitment of participants to the agreed-upon new strategies and priorities to work towards a sustainable future. This part of the process helped the Municipality of Alajuela formulate their local Agenda 21 with the participation of all sub-regions.

Values Identified in Alajuela Earth Charter

*Help
Responsibility Communication
Respect
Commitment
Loyalty
Tolerance
Modesty
Sharing
Solidarity
Equality
Honesty
Sensibility
Conscience
Love
Peace and Justice
Discipline*

Funding

The budget for the project came from the municipality of Alajuela and CUNA.

Results

The process of working to develop a local Earth Charter for Alajuela's Local Government allowed participants to acquire a general vision of the meaning of sustainable development. They subsequently decided to work on a Local Agenda 21 process for Alajuela.

The Earth Charter became an important working reference tool for Alajuela's local government plans. As a major result of the democratic participation, Alajuela Community College (CUNA) decided to get involved and promote Agenda 21 as well.

The process resulted in commitment from the local authorities in the region to endorse the Earth Charter and to implement Agenda 21, with the goal of pursuing collective dreams of building a better community and therefore a better world.

Conclusion

This effort shows that one possible way of working with the Earth Charter is to take the international Earth Charter as an inspirational tool and the basis for developing a contextualized adaptation. This process of developing a local version of the Earth Charter kept the main messages of the international Earth Charter and generated a strong sense of ownership among participants. The Municipality of Alajuela recognized that moving towards sustainability calls for some basic changes in attitudes, values and behaviours. However, this must first be undertaken at a local level, in order to take a step towards global sustainability.

Sensitivity and training in sustainable development issues promotes an attitude of transformation, which leads into a positive atmosphere at work and the community. The values identified by the community (see box above) provided momentum to a community committed to social transformation.

This case was directly drawn from the following sources:

- *An Earth Charter for Alajuela*; Publication of the Municipality of Alajuela, Costa Rica.
- *Agenda21 – A community proposal*; Publication of the Municipality of Alajuela, Costa Rica.