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# CREADS, A Teacher Training Course on ESD in Costa Rica

ALICIA JIMÉNEZ-ELIZONDO

## Abstract

After the Costa Rican government signed a commitment to implement the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), the challenge was how to put the commitment into action. Fortunately, an opportunity presented itself with an initiative called Peace with Nature (Iniciativa Paz con la Naturaleza–IPN), under which a teacher training course called Education for Sustainable Development Regional Course (CREADS) was implemented. A ‘coalition’ of governmental and nongovernmental organisations, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and IPN, was put in place to deliver the course and it was decided to use the Earth Charter as the course framework. This article describes the process of creating this course, its content and methodology, and analyses the course impact, lessons learned and challenges ahead.

**Keywords:** Earth Charter, education for sustainable development, Costa Rica, CREADS, teacher training

## BACKGROUND

**O**n 17 October 2006, the President of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias Sánchez, and his Cabinet signed a commitment to implement the United Nations Decade of

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Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). This commitment is based on the responsibilities that Costa Rica has acquired by adopting multiple international declarations on sustainable development, and its long-term efforts on environmental education.

The document affirms the Costa Rican government's interest to 'implement education for sustainable development (ESD) in an integral way, using the principles of the Earth Charter as a framework' (Government of Costa Rica 2006).

In parallel, President Arias created an initiative called Peace with Nature (IPN). This initiative aimed to generate plans of action to stop environmental degradation (see Table 1). Committees of experts from governmental and nongovernmental organisations were put together to propose actions on 12 crucial areas from water resources to ecotourism. An 11-member Education and Communication Committee was formed, coordinated by the Ministry of Public Education (MEP).

**Table 1** Peace with Nature initiative

The Peace with Nature Initiative supports actions within Costa Rica such as:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making Costa Rica carbon neutral by the year 2021</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating and implementing Environmental Management Plans in all governmental entities</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing forest cover in Costa Rica and strengthening its system of protected areas</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening the incorporation of environmental education for sustainable development into the Public Education curricula</li> </ul>

**Source:** Peace with Nature (IPN) website <http://www.peacewithnature.org/whoweare.php>

This Committee defined an action plan, with the general objective 'to promote, with a new ethic, the development of formal, nonformal and informal educational processes that would generate changes on the environmental behavior of Costa Rican population' (IPN 2008: 2).

Many actions were proposed to achieve this objective, but due to funding limitations, it was decided to prioritise one project: the development of a teacher training course on environmental education for sustainable development, called CREADS.

The course would follow the definition of ESD contained in the Costa Rican Commitment with the DESD:

.... An approach for change aimed at an improvement of the quality of life through a development model that takes into account social, cultural, environmental, economic, political, ethical and spiritual dimensions. This model has to strive for social equity and satisfaction of basic needs of current and future generation. (Government of Costa Rica 2006: 2)

The main objective of CREADS is 'to implement continuous training on education for sustainable development in order to sensitize, generate awareness and empower participants to make decisions to solve problems and work towards the improvement of quality of life in their institution, community or region' (MEP 2008: 1).

Personnel of MEP and IPN coordinated the implementation of the course. The target audiences were teachers and administrative personnel with decision-making power within the regional management units<sup>1</sup> (e.g., regional directors, school principals, curricula coordinators).

From August 2008 to October 2009, CREADS was implemented three times. Each time, the course was delivered to educators and administrators from two different regional management units (see Table 2). Around 200 participants have received this training so far.

**Table 2** Regional management units that have participated in CREADS

Course	Regional Management Units
CREADS 1	Heredia and Guapiles
CREADS 2	Aguirre and Puntarenas
CREADS 3	Nicoya and Liberia

## IMPLEMENTING CREADS

Several conditions had to be met to implement this course and make it attractive for educators, who are usually overwhelmed and complain of already heavy workloads.

First, it was important that the Ministry of Education and Civil Service accredited this course. In this sense, teacher-participants were able to earn 'points' that eventually translate to salary increases, an excellent incentive to secure participants' attendance throughout the course. In addition, the institutional support of MEP was fundamental because IPN is a Presidential Initiative, which will end at the end of President Arias' term in office.

Second, because of funding limitations, the course could be implemented only with the voluntary collaboration of different governmental and nongovernmental organisations, who offered their time and expertise for free. IPN covered the costs of the venue, transportation and food. Eight governmental and nongovernmental organisations have been involved in this process (see Table 3). Each organisation was

**Table 3** CREADS collaborators

• Earth Charter International Secretariat (ECI Secretariat)
• World Society for Protection of Animals (WSPA)
• National Meteorological Institute (IMN)
• Heredia's Public Services Company (ESPH)
• National Electricity Company (CNFL)
• EARTH University
• National Learning Institute (INA)
• Institute of Educational Research at the Univ. of Costa Rica (INIE)
• National Institute of Biodiversity (InBio)

responsible for delivering one topic. It is important to highlight that CREADS is the first course offered by MEP that has been open to instructors from civil society organisations.

A third condition was to have pedagogical materials available for all participants. This was a challenge, considering the funding limitations. Fortunately, the materials called 'Let's Learn a Sustainable Lifestyle with the Earth Charter!',<sup>2</sup> were available in enough quantities and were offered as foundational books. Another important resource was a CD with all the materials that the facilitators used during the sessions. Other collaborators also provided a significant number of educational materials.

Finally, a fourth condition was to have the participants' voluntary commitment to serve as multipliers for this capacity-building process in their regions. For this, participants had to define a project to enable the continuity of the training process in their school management unit.

## CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY

The Education Committee of IPN decided that the content should respond to the topics of the National Strategy for Environmental Education (Decree 32001-MEP) (see Table 4). There were two reasons for this decision: (1) it is mandatory for all schools to develop and implement action plans to address those topics and (2) there were available pedagogical materials organised around those topics (e.g., 'Let's Learn a Sustainable Lifestyle with the Earth Charter').

**Table 4** Themes of the national strategy for environmental education

Themes
• Conservation, protection and environmental recovery (social, cultural and natural)
• Prevention and mitigation on the impacts of human actions on the environment
• Respect to all forms of life
• Sustainable human development

**Source:** MEP 2004.

It was decided as well, to use the Earth Charter as the theoretical framework not only for the course, but for all subsequent environmental education actions in the schools. Therefore, a special session on the Earth Charter was organised. For Claudia Charpentier, one of the course coordinators, it was important to have this session at the beginning of the course, to set the ground for the rest of the topics, which were more theme-specific. The final course plan is shown in Table 5.

Considering that most participants were educators, it was important to be flexible with the schedule to prevent significant disruptions on their work. Each session lasted one full day (from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.) and there were only two sessions per month.

It was evident that a highly participatory methodology, following a 'learning by doing' style, would be the most effective. This would give the educators the experience of a transformative process in their way of thinking and acting towards more sustainable lifestyles. After being trained in the process, it would be easier and more natural for them to communicate this to their students and colleagues.

**Table 5** Final Teacher Training Course Plan

	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Facilitators</b>
Session 1	Inauguration. Workshop on training for multipliers, and information about the competencies of the Ministry's Environmental and Health Education Department.	Ministry of Education, IPN
Session 2	Earth Charter as an ethical framework for education for sustainable development	ECI Secretariat
Session 3	Topic 1: Respect to all forms of life	WSPA
Session 4	Topic 2: Sustainable production processes. Topic 3: Workshop on methods to formulate final projects.	EARTH, INA and INIE
Session 5	Topic 4: Protection of water resources. Topic 5: Mitigation and adaptation to climate change	ESPH and IMN
Session 6	Topic 6: Environmental management and environmental culture (waste management, energy use, the 4 Rs)	CNFL
Session 7	Presentation of participants' final projects and closing session	Ministry of Education, IPN

## HIGHLIGHTS OF CREADS

During the first session of the course, a workshop was organised with the Vice Minister of Education, Alejandrina Mata, which focused on learning strategies for multipliers. Participants did several group exercises using a book written by Mata. For many participants this was the first opportunity to work closely with someone in a high powered position. In addition, this session helped to clarify the course objectives and expectations of participants and the institutional support they were to expect from MEP.

For the second session, which focused on the Earth Charter, it was important to clarify the concept of sustainability, why it is important to move towards sustainability and how to bring this concept into the classroom. Participants were told that the definition for living in a sustainable way can be found in the Earth Charter. Therefore, many activities were planned to learn and reflect on each of the Earth Charter principles. For Diana Borrás and Esteban Gutiérrez, course coordinators from MEP, this session clarified the importance of expanding the vision of environmental education towards a more integral education.

Sessions 3 to 6 were theme oriented. These sessions helped participants learn about different topics and practical ways to practice sustainability, and also contributed to their transformation process.

Appealing to the emotions and fostering critical reflection on participants' values were important components of the course. For example, in Session 3 facilitators were successful in touching on participants' values towards other forms of life. Sentiments of empathy were promoted, as well as an ethic of care and respect. In Session 5,

participants reflected on the value of 'every drop of water'; they learned to care about this resource and the best practices to manage it.

It was important as well to raise awareness about the urgency of acting now to solve the unsustainability challenges we are facing. The workshop on climate change brought a sense of urgency to act and be proactive in our communities.

Participants were not left with feelings of despair about the challenges ahead. In sessions 4 and 6, they learned what people can do to move towards sustainability. These sessions followed a 'learning by doing' style. For example, in session 4, participants visited an 'integral farm'. In this farm, the production followed a zero waste cycle. Participants were able to experience the process of generating compost and biogas and see how they are used for farm processes.

In session 6, participants had the opportunity to create things out of waste. For example, they learned how to make handicrafts and even pedagogical materials to be used at the school. They learned how to start recycling campaigns at the school and what organisations could help them manage waste.

When the thematic sessions were over, the participants had one month to prepare their final project. Projects were done in groups to promote team building and dialogue skills. The course devoted one half-day session, carried out by education researchers from the University of Costa Rica, to give participants tools and ideas about how to create their projects.

The final project consisted of defining a plan to replicate this course in their school management unit. The objective was to put in place mechanisms for continuous professional development on ESD. These plans were presented during the last day of the course. After the course, each group was supposed to implement their plan.

## **IMPACT OF THE COURSE**

A major indicator of the impact and success of this course<sup>3</sup> was the creation and implementation of the final project. For Diana Borrás, one of the course coordinators, it was evident from the presentations of the projects that participants were deeply moved to engage in meaningful action. The projects so far have exceeded the coordinators' expectations, because they have gone beyond the replication of the course and have proposed actions to address local environmental and social problems.

For example, Borrás noted that a teacher from Jiménez High School, Guapiles, decided to start a process to share the knowledge acquired through CREADS, and at the same time address an environmental and social problem in his High School. He started an environment club with students with behavioural and mental problems. These students, who are usually left behind by other students, had the opportunity to manage a recycling project. At the same time, the teacher has been developing them as environmental leaders, providing tools and knowledge. The money collected from the recycling process has been used for scholarships for other mentally ill teenagers whose families can't afford the tuition (Borrás, personal communication, 8 Oct 2009).

Another source of information about the impact of the course comes from the questionnaire applied on the last day of class. These evaluations have not yet been

systematised, but preliminary results show that all participants gave high scores (very good to excellent) to all sessions and facilitators. For the coordinators, participants' comments expressed gratitude, enthusiasm and commitment to work hard on the projects, and even their tears at the end of the process, have been the best indicators that the course successfully achieved its objectives.

The successful implementation of the final project is another important indicator. To gather this information, the course coordinators met with the first CREADS cohort, to hear what each of the participants was doing on a personal level and collectively to put the knowledge and skills acquired into action.

So far, only Guapiles's Management Unit has started to implement their project. They have created 'Environmental Committees' in 70 per cent (150 schools and high schools) of their management unit's education institutions. These committees are in charge of replicating CREADS and generating other nonformal or informal ESD actions.

For Heredia Management Unit, implementing the plan of action has been difficult because their management unit director has been severely ill, and they require the director's support to start their plan.

At the personal level, the coordinators have gathered many stories that demonstrate participants' personal transformations. For example, several educators from Guapiles formed a group with students and parents to help protect sea turtles' eggs from poachers. They have been so successful that a conservationist organisation in the United States invited them to share their experiences.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES

From the participants' and facilitators' feedback, it seems that the course content has been appropriate. Nonetheless, the participants expressed their wish to have longer sessions for each topic, arguing that there was not enough time to grasp all the new information provided. Having more sessions and reaching out to more regional management units requires an increase in the budget—a difficult challenge because IPN does not have additional funding; therefore, finding new funding sources is a pressing need.

Having different facilitators for each session was a plus, because participants enjoyed different facilitation styles. But this posed challenges of how to make the links between sessions clear and how to ensure similar quality of presentation.

Fortunately, the coordinators from MEP were present throughout the course. The methodologies used varied between workshops and according to the coordinators some workshops were more successful than others. Overall, however, there was a general feeling that the content was effectively delivered.

Finally, it will be important to find ways to make sure that participants implement their projects to replicate this course. Having the Regional Management Unit Director's support for the process was fundamental for the successful implementation of the projects. Nonetheless, it is important not to generate a sense of dependence on the Director's approval to take action.



## Notes

- 1 The Ministry of Education has divided the country into 21 Regional School Management Units, similar to School Districts.
- 2 These materials were produced in 2005 by the Earth Charter International Secretariat, in collaboration with the CR National University (UNA), Distance Education University (UNED) and the Children's Museum.
- 3 It is important to clarify that this article refers only to the impact of the first CREADS because the other two courses had not finished by the time this article was written.

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