

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT NETWORK CASE STUDY HONDURAS, CENTRAL AMERICA

Introduction

Description of case Study

The ***Sustainable Development Network*** (SDN) is a Honduran NGO that initiated within the United Nations Development Program in 1994. The main purpose of SDN is to link the multiple actors involved in sustainable human development through access to electronic information. (They were the first to provide e-mail service in Honduras.) The founders, Raquel Isaula and Erlin Palma, began their work based on an agreement with the UN that the Network would become self sustaining after a start up period of four years.

In 1996 the SDN left the UN building which gave them greater freedom to develop their projects and vision without the constraints imposed by UN bureaucracy. They increased their staff to 5 people, including a webmaster, a person in charge of training member organizations, and a person responsible for installing e-mail and internet services.

When Hurricane Mitch swept the region in October, 1998, the SDN became involved in emergency and rehabilitation efforts, which boosted their visibility. Their services included organizing an electronic information system for civil society, as well as setting up 3 computers staffed by student volunteers from the universities to help provide information for friends and families living outside of the country (from this latter initiative, their telecenter, Naveg@, was born) . These efforts, as well as greater public relations, helped them grow in membership and increase the services they provided. Since 1998 they have met their goal of becoming self-sustaining, relying mostly on the income generated by services provided.

Key Strategies

The main purpose of SDN is to link the multiple actors involved in sustainable human development through access to electronic information.

Sustainability factors

Objectives

To strengthen the institutional capacity of public and private institutions in working towards Honduras' sustainable development through the promotion and exchange of information on behalf of the country's social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental development.

Policy environment

Institutional arrangements

- Responsibilities are very clear to team members. In Raquel's words, "we each have our own responsibility but we all do a bit of everything".
- Target groups basically are involved in discussion lists and some are specifically involved in managing topics, assisting in communications and services provided. The topics they work on include: environment and natural resources, social/cultural, politics, and economics. This includes research, placing information on the web, creating discussion lists, and publishing documents on the topic.
- Evaluation and review happens through periodical self-evaluation meetings. Raquel says they are very critical of their own work, hoping to improve on what they've been doing.

Target groups

- The SDN's membership includes national and international NGOs, government institutions, academic institutions, research centers, private businesses, grassroots organizations, consultants, and any other person interested in becoming a member.
- Target groups include academic institutions, NGOs, public (gov't) institutions, private businesses, consultants, and in general, any sector of society that is interested in the exchange of information.
- SDN is interested in poverty/development issues, and many of the discussion lists involve exchanges on the issue of poverty. They also have as members a number of grassroots organizations (for ex. farmer cooperatives), but the very poor most likely don't have access to computers and telephone lines.

Roles/Responsibilities

- The role of the users/members of SDN is to participate in the discussion lists. There are 3 different kinds of lists:
 1. open lists, in which anyone can subscribe and participate in
 2. closed lists, which are used by members of a smaller network or organization
 3. moderated lists, such as the "todos" (everyone) list, in which an intermediary goes through the mail to "weed out" junk mail or offensive mail.

Communication & Mobilisation of users

- SDN communicates with members through the discussion lists, especially the "to dos" list mentioned above. They keep people informed on changes, training, and services available.
- Their main mobilization or promotion happens through "word of mouth". They work hard at providing good technical services, good treatment to members, and so if their members are happy with the service, SDN asks them to help spread the word.

Gender

With respect to women's issues, one of the first lists to be opened and used widely was the women's issues list. This has helped to promote women's groups campaigns against domestic violence and laws for fair treatment.

Technology

ICT Inventory

- ♦ 20 Computers for staff use (Dell Dimension, 40 – 50 MH, 128 Ram)
- ♦ 35 Computers in Telecentre (10 Dell Dimension, 500 MG, 64 Ram; 20 HP, 933 MH, 128 Ram; 2 Micron 200 MH, 32 Ram; 3 Clones, 300 MH, 128 Ram)
- ♦ 3 Servers (2 Micron 200 MH, 128 Ram double processor; 1 PowerEdge 4,600 with 2 processors)
- ♦ 2 Communication servers for access to internet users (portmaster and 3com with USRobotics Modem)
- ♦ 2 routers (transl??) CISCO 2500 AND 2600 Series
- ♦ 2 modems RAD ASMI-50 U35 M
- ♦ a copy machine,
- ♦ a TV/VHS,
- ♦ a multimedia projector,
- ♦ a digital camera
- ♦ an overhead projector.

Most popular Services

- Their most popular services have to do with access to information: everyone needs it and wants to manage it, especially traditionally "confidential" information that used to be for government use only. Interestingly, Raquel says that this area of their work is what drains their finances, because although people want the information many aren't

willing to pay for it, and it takes a lot of staff time and energy (in some cases consultants) to get information on the different topics together. Their strategy to counter this is to create projects...more on this below.

Technical Support & repairs

- Most technical support is provided by their own staff.
- When repairs are beyond the possibility of their staff they have a service provider called Fastex who will come and carry out repairs. They're very good, fast, and reliable. SDN recommends them to their users..

Finance

Funding

- Initially they were given a grant of \$200,000 by the UN. They haven't received a major donation since 1998, and have had to cover their operating costs through the sale of services provided to members.
- Each member of staff is responsible for generating his/her own income through the services provided. In 1996 they started charging for membership.

Budget

- Their monthly budget is around \$25,000. When asked whether they were able to cover this amount, Raquel answered that they are currently having problems because of the economic recession and stronger competition in internet providers.

Cost Recovery & Sharing

- Other funding mechanisms include writing project proposals to international organizations which will help them provide more services. One of these services is a virtual newspaper. (Interestingly, Raquel doesn't view these projects as donations, rather she views them as the sale of services)
- They are also working on marketing products over the internet in a project called Network of Solidarity Markets. Their first project has been with dairy products (cheese and cream). This is interesting because it combines several aspects which are important to their work. In the first place, they have a relationship with an organized group of dairy farmers, for whom they did their web page. Second, they are using the internet as a means for publicity and sale of the dairy products, with the offer of home delivery (the first in Honduras). Part of the sales goes to SDN, the rest to the farmers' group. Third, they are giving a percentage of the sale towards meals for poor children in public schools. (not public schools like in England, public as in government sponsored).
- As far as cost recovery, it's happening, but it's difficult. Raquel feels it's very hard to balance the work that it takes to make marketing happen with the work in their other areas of information, training, and technical internet services. Members don't always want to pay for services, as well, because they say the SDN is an NGO, a non-profit, and shouldn't be charging for services.

Upgrading

- Equipment is upgraded when it's financially possible to do so, but it's not something they do often. Besides, technology advances so quickly, they have nowhere near the capacity to keep up. The last thing they changed was the "enlaces" (I don't know what this is, literally it translates to links or connections) which can do it's own backups.

The project process

- Initially a meeting was held with target groups (NGOs and CSOs) to discuss the project and get their input on how it should be organized, what services should be provided based on their needs. Target groups are also able to provide feedback on services provided right on their web page.
- The project was initially conceived as part of the UNDP's move towards creating a worldwide network of organizations working in development. However, in Honduras it

took on a greater force through Raquel and Erlin's vision to provide a vast number of services for information and promotion of development. That's why they had to leave the UN to grow in the direction they were interested in.

- The SDN helps facilitate information through five areas of work:
 - ♦ **Connectivity** (is this the correct translation?), in which they offer e-mail and internet services. They are different from other e-mail providers in that they maintain their members involved in information exchanges on different topics related to the country.
 - ♦ **Content**, in which they help promote Honduran development processes by providing information (through their web page: www.rds.org.hn) to different sectors in society. They provide an open, democratic forum in which everyone can participate.
 - ♦ **Training**, which specializes in forming people and institutions in the use and management of communication tools (both electronic and traditional media). This is to help organizations become more capable in providing information more efficiently as a contribution to the country's development.
 - ♦ **Marketing**, which includes both promoting their products and services to the public, as well as offering consulting services to institutions on internet marketing.
 - ♦ **Web page design and construction**, in which they provide help institutions with the design as well as the content. They also provide suggestions on services that can be implemented through the web site.
- Each of the topics covered (mentioned above in institutional arrangements with respect to discussion lists) includes sub-topics for research, creating data bases, reviewing laws and policies, and publishing documents in the web site, as well as maintaining the discussion lists.

Quality control

- Each staff member is responsible for his/her own area. They supervise the people working under them.

Intermediaries

- Some of the lists need a moderator (as an intermediary), especially the open lists, because a lot of the messages sent are inappropriate.
- The procedure for processing requests depends on the information needed. People can call in or come in and ask about services or about connectivity, etc. So the person responsible for that specific area deals with the requests.
- As far as editorial control, because the network is supposed to be an open forum, so SDN doesn't normally emit an opinion.

Key linkages

- SDN maintains a close relationship to a group of national consultants and other associates because they help provide the information for their content pages, and they also provide assistance in writing up new projects.
- They also have linkages with some international organizations that help subsidize training events. Includes HIVOS, the International Institute of Academies
- They consider their key linkages to be with member organizations since they are the basis for carrying out joint training events and information projects. They currently have over 300 member organizations.

Capacity

Staff

- There is no provision for training, because the staff are all self-taught. When they get new software, they're given time to study the manuals. At the level of technology they use, their training would have to be outside of the country and it's far too expensive for them to finance this.

Users

- ICT capacity in the groups mentioned above has vastly grown in the past few years. SDN does offer training related to internet use and communication tools. Their web page also explains the basics of e-mail and web pages.

Development benefits

- There's been a noticeable impact in the opening for the disclosure of information in the thematic areas they work on, as well as with information on technology. The Network has become a medium for alternative information. This is the kind of information that isn't passed on radio or TV, so SDN has become an alternative for civil society's need for information.
- Some of the issues they've covered/addressed and had impact on are: The law for children's rights, ethnic group issues, the Human Rights Commission. They know that their publishing information over the internet creates an impact because their web site has been visited by government institutions (some which are subscribed members), and the U.S. security system. Many newspapers will also react to articles or documents published by SDN as well. The fact that the information is out there forces traditional media to touch on the issues that are being addressed.

Points of Interest

- Although the issue of sustainability seems to have been covered, they are the first to acknowledge that it is a continuous struggle to maintain, due to the current competition from other internet providers and café nets opening up on every corner. Although everyone wants access to information, not everyone is willing to pay for it. Thus, they continue working on coming up with new projects and ideas to help maintain their level of sustainability without losing their vision.