

National and Regional performance and accountability: “State of the Nation/Region Program – Costa Rica”.

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The State of the Nation Report: a method to learn and think about a country.

The State of the Nation/Region Program is a research and capacity building centre focusing on the appraisal and promotion of sustainable human development (SHD). Its main purpose is to provide citizens with easily accessible instruments to measure SHD performance, to enhance accountability of public affairs, to strengthen mechanisms for participation, and to improve the quality of public deliberation. The Centre’s leit motiv is “to know the Costa Rica we have, to think the Costa Rica we wish”.

The Program pursuits its objectives through various mechanisms, especially through the preparation of periodic comprehensive reports that assess the societal performance in SHD by the government, public institutions, private sector and citizens. A set of aspirations derived from the SHD concept are the parameters for appraising this performance. These aspirations also express a normative vision of the “country we wish”. Through critical yet balanced and thoroughly documented evidence, and open discussion, the reports have become a powerful tool for strengthening democracy and positively affecting people’s life.

Reports for Central America have also been published under this same framework, since 1999 --*State of the Region on Sustainable Human Development*—aimed to serve as a navigation tool that can help recognize regional realities, identify challenges, and trace possible routes and build alternatives for strengthening sustainable human development in Central America. The effort combines the analysis and the articulation of research networks and capacities with the informed deliberation, and includes robust participatory mechanisms and practices. As of July 2009, three State of the Region Reports have been published.

The State of the Nation/Region Program initiative is based on the conviction that to deal with the social, economic, environmental and political challenges a democracy requires informed citizens, with constructive capabilities and illusion. A citizen with information is a citizen with democratic power, but also with more responsibilities towards his/her community and country.

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The beginning of the Program

The State of the Nation was established in 1994 and from its onset received support from the National Council of Rectors (Conare) of Costa Rica and the Ombudsman Office as a project of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in partnership with other national and international collaborators, such as the European Union.

A rigorous academic exercise was first followed, which included detailed analysis of available information, identification of prospective visions of the country, as well as documents elaborated by the political system (government programs and national development plans), international commitments assumed by Costa Rica, and the conceptualizations of “development” proposed by diverse international organizations. Issues, approaches, relevant variables and indicators were identified to guide the definition and practical implementation of a conceptual and methodological proposal for measuring sustainable human development in Costa Rica. In 1995, the *First State of the Nation Report on Human Development* was published, and since then it has been presented annually.

In 2003, the initiative was restructured and acquired the status of an institutional program based in Costa Rica, with regional capabilities and activities in progress. The Ombudsman and the four public institutions of higher education (University of Costa Rica, National University, Technological Institute of Costa Rica, At Distance State University), associated in Conare, consolidated their support through the creation of the Program and establishing an agreement for its operation. In addition it has received continuous support from the international cooperation (UNDP, ILO, UNICEF, PAHO, European Union, the Bilateral Agreement on Sustainable Development Costa Rica-Netherlands, the Government of the Netherlands and the Government of Sweden, among others). Several national institutions have also provided support.

Since then, the *State of the Nation/Region Program* has made significant efforts in order to promote and deepen the study and discussion on SHD, first in Costa Rica, and then in Central America. In fact, is among three of the oldest initiatives measuring human development on the planet. It is therefore a groundbreaking report. As was noted in the 2001 **UNDP Human Development Report**, it is one of the most persistent efforts in this matter, to this date few countries have managed to produce so many successive reports as Costa Rica (UNDP, 2001).

Today it is an independent and consolidated centre with a significant influence on the national/regional agenda and on public policy-making. It has published 14 national annual reports --*State of the Nation on Sustainable Human Development*-- 2 reports on the *State of Education in Costa Rica*, 3 regional reports (Central America), and one "*Citizen Audit on the Quality of Democracy*", among other publications. The program has also participated in developing the Latin American Index on *Budget Transparency* (Costa Rica) on three occasions, and collaborated with the **InterAmerican Development Bank** (IADB) in the preparation of the "*National Profile of Governance*" (2008).

The Orientations of the State of the Nation/ Region Reports

The starting point of the Reports is the notion that sustainable human development is a multidimensional and continuous process, which brings together components and dimensions of development of societies and individuals that are central in generating capacities and opportunities to and for the people, by which equity increases for current and future generations (UNDP, 1994).

The concept of sustainable human development (SHD) that has been used in the reports is based on the proposal of the *Human Development Report* of UNDP and the contributions of Amartya Sen. The SHD concept differs from the human capital concept, focused on the production possibilities, by emphasizing the ability of people to carry-out the type of life they consider valuable and increasing their real possibilities of choice (Sen, 1997). Within this view, economic growth, to which much importance was given during the eighties as an exclusive driver of development, becomes a means to enhance the real wealth of the countries: the people. By placing human beings at the center of this process, it emphasizes the importance of all people to have equal access to opportunities, at present as well as in the future (State of the Nation Program, 1995).

The SHD has a historical character, that is, its dimensions, components and challenges evolve differently in each society and through time, as well as the aspirations and expectations of the people derived from it. The concept results from the tension between the current situation and the challenges that every society faces. Hence, in order to understand the peculiarities of SHD in Costa Rica or Central America, and complementary to the efforts made at the international level to define the human development index (SHD), it was necessary to

undertake a methodological work of conceptualizing and putting into operation, a more comprehensive and specific vision of the country/region, far beyond national averages and means.

Also, this concept of SHD is part of the tradition of human rights (Sen, 2001) and keeps a close relationship with them, nurtured by its own definition. Furthermore, in Costa Rica, monitoring SHD becomes in fact a source of inquire of the diffuse rights of the people, on economic, social, cultural, environmental and political matters.

Every year, the preparation of the reports follows an innovative methodology, which includes the articulation of an extended research network, the discussion of preliminary results in workshops (nearly 300 participants), and an organized dissemination process, that for the national report involves close to 140 annual presentations with over 4500 attendants, and mass media op-eds, TV news and articles. Three basic orientations guide the process: academic rigor, social legitimacy and broad diffusion, as detailed below:

Academic Rigor

The first orientation of the Program is based on the research capacities of institutions, experts and sectors of the society, creating and promoting research networks which have yielded reliable information and analysis of quality, without having to create complex structures. Every year more than five hundred bibliographical references are systematized and approximately fifty research studies are conducted for the national reports.

This practice has generated a stream of analysis on SHD and new research policies at national and sub-national levels. It has also been able to systematize data from varied sources, with real impact on the formulation of indicators: from their identification to the methods used, including addressing topics rarely treated previously. A Statistical Compendium is elaborated for each edition, that in the case of the national report includes over 250 variables, with levels of disaggregation according to various criteria (sex, zone, region, age group, productive institutional sectors, etc.) and long term series of the last 10 years, from thirty official sources, in many cases re-calculated by the Program, as well as many non-official sources.

Social Legitimacy

To gain legitimacy, several strategies have been designed that are important parts of the process of preparing the reports. Some of these mechanisms are:

- *Participatory identification of topics and issues to be investigated for each report.*

- *Integration of a diverse, permanent and active Advisory Committee.*
- *Consultation workshops with different sectors and actors of the society in at least three stages of the preparation process (at definition of research approaches, review of in-progress work and discussion of final synthesis).*
- *Everyday contacts with social and political actors and an active seek of new mandates for research.*
- *Promotion of social dialogue on public policies on various issues.*

Amplitude of the dissemination

The third principle is to achieve maximum dissemination of the reports, other publications and of the Program itself. There is an important emphasis on direct relationships, through presentations to groups, academic forums, social organizations, teachers, students, government officers and media. Other mechanisms include:

An agenda with the Media, to broadcast the main findings of the reports, including press conferences, training workshops and information for journalists. In the last three years, the Program recorded the publication of 450 news related to *The State of the Nation Report*, including coverage in newspapers, radio and TV. The last *State of the Region Report* (2008) generated more than 123 news across Central America.

Report Distribution, distribution of printed copies of the reports and of the executive summaries is another channel for diffusion. This task is carried out after the official presentations. Each year about 2,500 reports are donated, which are delivered door to door to decision makers (president, vice presidents, ministers, deputies, diplomats, international organizations, universities and public in general). Also, the report is on sale in bookstores. In total, 4,500 reports and 7,000 abstracts are distributed each year. On several occasions, some of the most widely published magazines and local newspapers, have summarized the main contents of the Report as a special insert.

In the case of the *State of the Region Report* (2008), 1740 people across the isthmus received a copy into their offices. The list included members of the Advisory Council, people involved in the elaboration of the Report, decision makers, government authorities and regional institutions, diplomatic corps, civil society leaders, sponsors of the project, some Central American regional institutions, OP:SICA, universities, and international libraries. A summary of the Report was also distributed (in English and Spanish) to approximately 100 academic institutions outside Central America, to Latin American specialists in several prestigious universities

in South America, United States and Europe. Strategy and Business, a magazine of very wide circulation in the isthmus, devoted an entire issue to the contents of the Report.

Website. The site www.estadonacion.or.cr has been recording 5.2 million hits per year and approximately 35,000 complex visits per month (visiting several sections, downloading and usually printing).

Educational System: activities are developed in a systematic way with and for the educational system, including courses for teachers and advisors, the publication of specific books such as *Contemporary Costa Rica*, *Roots of the State of the Nation*, and the use of the reports as basic materials for courses in secondary education and universities. In addition, training modules for primary and secondary education have been developed, as well as modules specific for schools attended by migrant children.

A recent national telephone survey provided a first measurement of the amplitude of diffusion of the Program: over 29% of the interviewers reported **to know** the Program and close to 2/3 of these properly identified the objectives and overall nature of the Program.