

# **CONSENSUS-BUILDING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT : LEARNING TO TALK TOGETHER**

**Introductory Workshop by Edgardo García Larralde :  
Basic Concepts, Assumptions and Tools for Building Multi-stakeholder  
Consensus and Developing Tri-sector Partnerships  
for Sustainable Development  
Tuesday 9 September 2003  
Elmina, Ghana**

## ***Concepts, assumptions, emerging lessons: an overview***

Human societies, even so-called 'simple' ones, are complex systems constituted by many different legitimate actors with varying interests. Globalisation has added to this complexity by bringing together, frequently involuntarily, people and organisations from widely different societies and cultures. A growing body of evidence from projects throughout the world, indicates that the key challenges facing corporations and governments in the implementation of development initiatives, are relational in nature. They are associated with issues of cultural diversity, decision-making processes and stakeholder expectations.

Experience has repeatedly shown that the significance of these 'soft' issues should not be underestimated. When mishandled, they tend to produce effects that impact traditional 'hard' issues (including the security and continuity of industrial operations). An awareness of this reality contributes towards erasing the simple and clear distinction that used to separate 'soft' and 'hard' issues in the minds of corporate directors and managers, especially in the extractive industries (mining, oil and gas).

There is a growing understanding among international corporations and other key stakeholders, that win-win solutions to development challenges are not only possible; they are the only guaranteed path towards sustainability. It is becoming increasingly clear that, in the mid and long terms, win-lose solutions tend to convert to lose-lose situations (witness the consequences of Israel's repeated 'victories' over the Palestinians). Tri-sector partnerships (between governments, corporations and communities) aimed at developing consensus-based win-win solutions to development challenges, are proving to be a powerful tool for managing complex and sensitive social and environmental issues.

Managing these issues requires innovative thinking and new skills, to develop relations of mutual understanding and trust and a shared commitment to achieve common goals, among stakeholders. Training key stakeholders (staff of corporations, government officials and community leaders, among others) in facilitation and consensual negotiation skills, has emerged as a key capacity-building activity of development initiatives. The role of a third party facilitator (or 'honest broker') in building consensus and developing partnerships among key stakeholders, has proven crucial in many successful projects and is increasingly considered a key component of development projects and programmes.

## ***Workshop dynamics and conclusions : a summary***

The introductory workshop, held during the afternoon of Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2003, congregated 26 participants from several countries. The first part of the workshop commenced with an initial presentation by the facilitator of the basic concepts, assumptions and tools associated with consensus-building and developing tri-sector partnerships. It was followed by a question and answer session, during which the following issues were raised and (in some cases) briefly debated by participants:

- Interest was expressed in examples of successful partnerships. In response, the facilitator briefly described case studies of projects in several parts of the world.
- Several examples of African experiences were brought up.
- In addressing questions raised by participants, and drawing from experiences in different countries, the facilitator mentioned critical success factors in developing consensus-based solutions to development challenges.
- The different roles played by NGOs, were critically debated. Examples of NGOs that promote dialogue and consensus-building amongst stakeholders, were contrasted with cases where NGOs push their own agendas, sometimes without sufficient consideration for the interests of other stakeholders.
- Questions were debated relating to capacity-building among stakeholders, geared to developing consensus-building and consensual negotiation skills.

After the coffee break, the second part of the workshop started with participants breaking out into 4 groups to carry out a short role-play negotiation exercise. After the 4 groups had finished the exercise, they presented the results in plenary. The groups also described what had occurred in the negotiation, and how they had arrived at the results achieved. In plenary, the different results and negotiation processes were analysed and debated by participants.

The final part of the workshop consisted of a presentation and subsequent discussion of the roles, skills and ethics of a third party facilitator, in processes of consensus-building and partnership development. The limits and challenges of partnerships were also debated. In evaluating the workshop, participants made the following observations:

- The concepts, tools and consensus-building approach presented can be very useful to the three stakeholder groups (governments, communities and companies).
- The exercise carried out during the workshop was very useful in pointing out and helping understand how learnt attitudes fuel adversarial dynamics capable of foiling win-win solutions, even when these are objectively possible and clearly superior to other solutions. The exercise provided insights into the participants' own reactions.
- It was widely felt that the workshop should be repeated for other stakeholders, with more time dedicated to practical exercises and discussion of case studies (at least a full day was considered necessary).
- Several participants expressed an interest in organising training activities geared to developing facilitation skills among local actors.

The facilitator informed that each participant would receive a copy of the 33-slide workshop presentation. The workshop commenced at 2:45 pm and ended at 6:30 pm.