

Meet the **COMET-LA** family

Latin America is often referred to as a megadiverse region and managing its environmental services therefore generates significant challenges. **Professor Maria del Mar Delgado** explains current efforts to support community-led activities and how these can be translated to other parts of the globe

COMET-LA



We first spoke to the Community-based Management of Environmental challenges in Latin America (COMET-LA) project in October 2012. Could you reiterate the project's goals and discuss how it has evolved over the past year?

COMET-LA's main objective is to identify sustainable community-based governance models for the management of environmental challenges. In the year and a half that we have been working on our three case studies, we have characterised the social-ecological systems (SES) and identified the factors

with the highest impact on the systems' sustainability. The framework used permits to characterise the variables affecting the resource system and the resource units, the users/actors, the governance system and the external settings. More significantly, it also analyses the interactions among these subsystems and the outcomes they produce.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently released its Fifth Assessment Report (5AR – see p6), stating that humans are responsible for at least half of the observed climate change on Earth. In what ways is COMET-LA responding to this issue?

The last decade has brought important advances in the production of scientific knowledge on climate change. International assessments such as the IPCC reports analyse changes at the global level. However, little progress can be seen in how climate change will affect natural resources at the local level and the communities that base their livelihood on them. Local communities lack information about the complexity and causes of these changes and often also lack the capabilities to gear adaptations to new scenarios. COMET-LA is analysing how community-based management can help to implement sustainable governance models for natural resources with the full involvement of local communities.

Are you focusing on any environmental challenges specific to Latin America?

The challenges faced by COMET-LA are not unique to Latin America. We deal with changes and problems that are common to different SES related to our planet, such as the management of water, biodiversity and forests, changes in land use, and management of marine and coastal areas. We expect the methods to be tested in other territories and that the results obtained in our three case studies will be upscaled and useful for other SES.

COMET-LA analyses three Latin American countries: Colombia, Mexico and Argentina. What have you discovered about their SES to date?

Our three cases studies are rather different in several aspects. We focus on common pool resources (CPR) and the significant pressures (internal and external) on their use. Mexican and Colombian communities have common use of land and resources, whereas in Argentina most of the resources are privately owned, even if fisheries and coasts are CPR. One of the main findings is that governance systems and property rights are key variables to foster sustainable management. The capacity of controlling, monitoring and sanctioning inadequate use is very relevant.



HOUSES BY THE SIDE OF THE CALIMA RIVER, COLOMBIA

Are there any forthcoming events related to this work that you wish to highlight?

Project outcomes will be presented towards the end of February 2015 in a Policy Conference at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), where we expect to gather a good representation of important stakeholders.

What will be the project's next steps? Does COMET-LA have any exciting future plans?

In the next months, COMET-LA will develop the narratives for scenario building in each case study and will analyse the potential consequences of each of them in the sustainability of the SES. This will be the last methodological phase of the project, after which we expect to have a good understanding of the key factors affecting the sustainable governance of natural resources. We will then concentrate on the project's 'exit strategy' regarding dissemination and capitalisation of results. The outcome should be a road map that empowers communities, giving them opportunities to shape their future using COMET-LA methods and tools.

Another exciting plan is to exchange knowledge and results with other projects working in community-based management of environmental challenges in Latin America such as ECOADAPT, COBRA, CiVi.net (see p11) and COMBIOSERVE.

As a final remark, I would like to thank all the people that are making the development of COMET-LA possible: from EC funding to the various partner members and especially the community members and stakeholders of the three case studies. A very special mention should also go to the young researchers that are contributing their knowledge and enthusiasm to create what we call the big COMET-LA family (*la gran familia* COMET-LA).



Care in the community

Latin America is responsible for some of the most sustainable community-led ecosystem management initiatives developed to date. These efforts require support to ensure effective solutions are effectively disseminated and translated. **COMET-LA** is designed to provide such assistance

SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT is one of the great challenges of the modern era, not least for Latin America – a region whose economy is built upon exporting its natural resources. Many efforts at a local level rely upon civil society organisations (CSOs) to support and direct management activities. These CSOs encompass a wide range of citizen associations that provide benefits, services or political influence to specific societal groups, including business fora, faith-based associations, labour unions, local community groups, NGOs, philanthropic foundations and think tanks.

COMET-LA is an EU Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) project funded under a scheme launched by the EC Call: 'Research for the benefit of specific groups – civil society organisations'. Gathering 11 partners (six research institutions, one SME and four CSOs) as well as several local, regional and international stakeholders, it started in January 2012 and will end in January 2015.

The project's main objective is to identify sustainable community-based governance models for the management of environmental challenges. "The main outcome will be the delivery of community-based sustainable governance models for the management of water, biodiversity, forests and marine and coastal areas," outlines Professor Maria del Mar Delgado, the project's coordinator. The working method is based on building a learning arena where scientific and local knowledge are shared and integrated, using participatory techniques. This not only fosters participation, but also the involvement and co-responsibility of the local communities in the project, leading to empowerment and a higher level of relevance to local needs.

COMET-LA comprises three case studies analysing the main environmental challenges faced by common pool resources in specific social-ecological systems (SES): water and biodiversity management is analysed in two communitarian councils in the Colombian Pacific, forest management in a community of the Mexican Sierra

of Oaxaca, and marine and coastal management in the Argentinean Bahia Blanca Estuary.

To identify sustainable governance models, the work is organised around three phases: a comprehensive characterisation of SES, based on the framework proposed by Elinor Ostrom to analyse sustainability; the identification of current and future key variables using prospective analysis techniques; and the building of scenarios for future changes and challenges.

Gender issues play an important role in the management of natural resources. At present, there tends to be significant differences in perception, management and expectations between women and men in this area. The project works with a gender-sensitive approach to analyse and integrate these different visions. Indeed, the role played by women in the COMET-LA learning arena was submitted to the Momentum for Change initiative launched by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), who will host information on COMET-LA gender initiatives on its own site.

FIRST RESULTS

An approach of community-based management of natural resources has often been considered well-suited to governing commons. It seeks to establish a direct linkage between conservation and local benefits, involving local communities in conservation is often used as a means of ensuring measures meet with less local resistance. Furthermore, protecting the long-term productivity of resources may be used as a means to enhance local livelihoods and development options.

Having reached its midterm, COMET-LA has characterised the three SES and the main variables influencing sustainability have been identified. All case studies present sustainability problems in one or several aspects.

The Mexican case study is environmentally sustainable, but they are regenerating forest,



INTELLIGENCE

COMET-LA

COMMUNITY-BASED MANAGEMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN LATIN AMERICA

OBJECTIVES

To identify sustainable community-based governance for the management of natural resources that could be used in different social-ecological systems in a context of climate change and increasing competition within existing contexts.

PARTNERS

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giving preference to forest preservation as opposed to its economic exploitation. Thus they receive very low incomes and few livelihood options are available to the community, leading to poverty and migration trends. An additional problem in the area is the existence of compulsory non-paid community works. This system is therefore being contested by young people. These factors highly condition the economic and social sustainability.

In the Colombian case, the geographical location in one of the most biodiverse areas of the planet and the richness of hydric resources contributes to the environmental sustainability of the area even if the resources are suffering internal (hunting, logging) and external (mining, illegal crops) pressures. Poverty rates and lack of formal jobs are major problems affecting economic sustainability in the area. Furthermore, access to services like health, education and infrastructures is very poor in many communities, even if the community authorities have made attempts to improve them. Other social problems derive from relations with external agents (miners, illegal crop traders, paramilitary, etc.).

In contrast, the situation in Argentina is totally different. The tradition in the region is to place economic development before sustainability. The estuary is a wealthy area with one important harbour and a petrochemical 'pole' that contributes to economic sustainability. According to official statistics, the number of inhabitants is continuously increasing, but the area lacks any territorial identity. Each locality faces different challenges and there is no integrated vision of the territory and problems inflicted on the resources by the different actors and sectors in the area. Some of the reasons for this individualism can be found in Argentinian history and its tradition of dictatorial periods that banned collective actions; society was composed of immigrants who arrived less than 200 years ago from different countries and without territorial or identity links with the area.

In the analysis of issues affecting the sustainability of the SES, governance and property right issues emerge as key variables in all cases. In two (Mexico and Colombia), the local communities own the land and natural resources. They have internal management rules as well as monitoring and control processes, but they have limited capacity to control external pressures, to influence external policies or to monitor and sanction the actions of external actors in the territory. In the Argentina case study, there are state-driven rules and sanctions for the sustainable management of

beaches and fisheries, but neither state nor the local communities have the necessary means to properly control it.

For the moment, the main COMET-LA beneficiaries have been the local communities in the case studies. However, the project is making an important contribution to the methodological advance, making scientific methodologies more applicable and adapted to the use at the local level. A further contribution in its last stages will be the upscaling of the results to be used by other SES and further areas.

LESSONS LEARNED

Sound knowledge exists at the local level for the sustainable management of natural resources, but management is not always sustainable. There are important conflicts, tensions and critical points affecting the current and future use of these resources which the local communities have insufficient capacity and power to address.

Scientific and local knowledge can be complementary and synergistic, but research must be adapted in order to be understandable and usable at local level.

Local communities face important challenges to link Nature conservation and economic welfare. Economic and social incentives to keep sustainable practices are irrelevant; the lack of economic value and markets for environmental goods and services means that those preserving the environment do not receive economic benefits for it and are forced either to destroy Nature or to live in very basic conditions. Policies and tools are needed to help local people access the benefits of their sustainable management actions.

A major finding is that current development models, based on markets, individualism, competitiveness and private property rights, pose important conflicts to traditional values based on ancestral management and common property rights. The influence of external models and their attractiveness for youngsters pose doubts about the future continuity of community-based collective management of natural resources, and increase the vulnerability of these SES. The COMET-LA learning arena works well as an exchange space to integrate local and scientific knowledge in the management of natural resources. Ultimately, as COMET-LA demonstrates, to foster positive long-term action this knowledge has to be salient, credible and legitimate.



The COMET-LA team after recording radio programmes at the local Radio Xeglo station, Mexico.