

**Citizenship And Civil Society:  
The Emerging North American Community At The Local Level**

*Summary Of Discussion At Exploratory Workshop  
Sol y Sombra  
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## **Overview**

The workshop began with self-introductions by the participants, in which they indicated their principal areas of concern, interest, and expertise. We then proceeded to an open discussion to identify key issues affecting both borders at the local level. As that discussion unfolded, it became apparent that the issues fell generally into two broad categories--substantive issues and process issues. This led naturally to a discussion of what obstacles local communities face and what opportunities they have to address the problems identified. At the end of the workshop, the moderator set forth a summary of the discussion to that point, and there was further discussion around that summary. The workshop concluded with an identification of “next steps.”

The summary that follows will follow the basic organization of the issues that emerged and occupied most of the discussion:

### ***Issues***

As the group went through the process of identifying issues of concern to local border communities, one theme that emerged quickly was what we came to call sustainable development in its very broadest sense, including protection and nourishment of culture as well as environmental protection and economic welfare. The other “issue” theme that emerged was the incoherence of jurisdiction in the border regions, reflected in and to some extent caused by the lack of effective political power of border communities. The incoherence of jurisdiction leads to numerous problems in developing and implementing action programs, whether public or private.

Sustainable development, broadly construed, is a unifying theme for many issues that are common to both the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada border regions. The group identified water supply, with reference to both quantity and quality, as a fundamental challenge. Bilateral federal government attention to water in both border areas has, in the views of the group, often focused on the discrete questions without taking proper account of the whole context. International efforts were also faulted for inadequate attention to processes for informed participation by local communities. The borders exacerbate the water problems by heightening the social and environmental sensitivities associated with transfer or allocation of water and cross-border pollution. Similar comments were made about other environmental protection issues in border regions, such as air quality and land use.

Economically, the group generally held the view that the border regions are bearing a significant burden from increased trade under NAFTA without adequate national support and without sharing proportionally in the benefits. As one participant put it, the border communities are subsidizing NAFTA integration. The physical infrastructure in many communities is overwhelmed by NAFTA-stimulated growth in production and in

commercial traffic. Heightened U.S. controls on migration have created severe bottlenecks at U.S.-Canada border crossings as well as at the notoriously congested crossings between the U.S. and Mexico, leading not only to pollution but disrupting patterns of local cross-border business and social visitation. Thus, the burdens on the communities are an extra obstacle to sustainable development in its economic, social, and environmental aspects.

Socially and culturally, the local communities have many strengths, but the border impedes cooperation (e.g., in education and health services) and restricts access to financial support from the public sector (legal limitations), private sector (because of ambivalence about commitment to the larger trans-border community) and foundations (much foundation funding still stops at the border), and creates unusual gaps in areas such as private sector support.

The second major issue area for border communities is jurisdictional incoherence. The group identified seven respects in which sovereignty is an obstacle that helps to perpetuate political and legal inadequacy at the local level:

- political will
- knowledge
- capacity and infrastructure
- leadership
- technology
- access
- access to information
- lack of continuity.

The incoherence has multiple aspects. At the largest scale, there is the disparity between the national and municipal scales of cooperation--the common problem of jurisdictional limits within governments--compounded by the border problem of jurisdictional limits between governments at all levels. There is thus a formidable problem of getting effective local participation without regard to jurisdictional boundaries. At the national and state/provincial levels, and even to some extent at the local level, there is the problem of the "us" v. "them" mentality. The desired result is sustained partnerships and a collaborative rather than an adversarial relationship; the challenge is to overcome fragmentation and local alienation.

Contributing to the incoherence is the general inadequacy of cross-border information development and information sharing. The work of the Border Ecology Project water monitoring project and the Paso del Norte Air Quality committee are models efforts at overcoming this barrier. The question is whether their models can be transferred, and in general how to generalize from local success stories.

The issue of information generation and sharing raises another jurisdictional incoherence--the almost total lack of mechanisms for "horizontal" communication and collaboration along each border, as well as across the borders. There was a sense that horizontal collaboration may be an effective approach to another consequence of the jurisdictional incoherence, which is the general lack of engagement of power that does not reside in the border area. Thus, the need for increased attention to local involvement becomes at the same time a challenge to increase the awareness of non-border power centers that they, too, are stakeholders in the border communities.

In discussing the jurisdictional problems, the participants were not questioning the role of the various levels of government in local cross-border sustainable development. On the contrary, each level of government can make valuable contributions. For example, some participants noted that federal government involvement sometimes helps to provide the continuity that is often lacking in local efforts. Moreover, on some issues, such as management of trade-related transportation, more, not less, federal involvement is needed.

### ***Process***

Promoting sustainable development in border communities and overcoming the obstacles of jurisdictional incoherence call for new social and political processes. As the group discussed the process questions, we identified three important aspects. First, border communities and other participants need to identify their vision--what are we trying to achieve? Second, consistent attention and innovative approaches are needed to achieve effective local involvement in the important decisions affecting these communities. Finally, processes are needed to overcome the jurisdictional problems identified above, to promote cooperation across levels of government, and to engage the larger national and international players in border issues.

In order to define the vision, the group agreed, borders should be looked at in their entirety. That is, there should be integration of the vision, both geographical and across issues. In addition, the process should specifically include the private sector and NGOs as parts of the community that can fill the gaps in public sector programs. The vision should be open to--indeed should seek out--new approaches and new players. In a repeated theme, the group emphasized an inclusive process for building consensus and deciding on priorities.

More specifically on local involvement, there was a general consensus in the group that federal, state, and even local governments did not usually employ appropriate mechanisms to seek involvement from all parts of the local community. Many participants spoke of inadequate consultation and alienation of the local community. The question is how to change this process. Some suggested that local and state interests could "knock doors down." Others suggested studying successful "models" of

participation, and transferring them to other contexts. The work of the Arizona-Sonora Commission was mentioned as one example of new forms of interaction. Throughout, the group envisioned not only official processes, but also taking advantage of and developing unofficial and voluntary processes.

### **Moderator's Summation**

On the second morning of our discussion, the moderator offered his summation of the discussion. He identified nine key points that had emerged:

- Local border communities need inclusive processes, processes that get all the right people involved with effective opportunities to participate and with access to quality information. We need to create events and build knowledge to enable participation; on this point, we specifically include distant players and the opportunity to hold them accountable.
- Local border communities need leadership at all levels, including “angels” who can provide innovative ideas and targeted support. Leadership training should be instituted.
- Local border communities have a critical need for ongoing support--in terms of people and money.
- Local border communities need a combination of broad vision and a sense of urgency.
- Local border communities need to construct effective partnerships and develop a “social language.”
- There is an interaction between visionary and strategic programs (home runs) and more modest locally-based initiatives (bunts and singles).
- Local border communities must deal with multiple levels of government, including intergovernmental associations (e.g., Western Governor 's Association) and international institutions.
- Local border communities should establish efficient, results-oriented processes, including step-wise approaches that have specific benchmarks.

Local border communities have a critical interest in improved education of and communication with the larger public and civic leaders on cross-border dynamics and the broader significance of the problems that the local communities face.

### *Next Steps*

The workshop concluded with a discussion of next steps in working toward the shared goals that the group had articulated.

One step is to convene further meetings. One immediate opportunity suggested by the Canadian government is a conference on border issues in the Detroit-Windsor area on the occasion of a planned bilateral meeting between Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy and Secretary of State Madeline Albright in December, 1998. The group was informed that the Canadian Consulate in Dallas had already contacted NAMI to solicit NAMI's assistance in the development of this conference.

A second step is to develop themes of broad interest to border communities in North America, such as air quality, water quality and supply, cultural issues, etc., specifically including the broad civil society in these efforts, including first nations/indigenous populations and the private sector.

A third step is to promote communication among border communities. There should be connections between community leaders, electronic links, and "early warning" systems to help promote common responses to common issues (in the spirit of "horizontal communication").

A fourth step is to build mechanisms for a sustained effort on behalf of the local border communities, including convening of "roundtables," development of electronic supports such as listservs and web pages. Regional forums were also proposed, in which universities could act as facilitators to develop consortiums of interested players with a practical, not an academic, focus.