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CONDESAN: Two Decades of Innovation for the Sustainable Development of the Andean Ecoregion

CONDESAN

In almost 2 decades of existence the Consorcio para el Desarrollo Sostenible de la Ecorregión Andina (CONDESAN) has experienced institutional innovations in response to the economic, social, environmental, and institutional dynamics of Andean countries and territories. As a result, interinstitutional interventions have been promoted in strategic spaces of the Andean region through local and regional projects in order to contribute to knowledge about the Andes, its provision of natural resources, and the strategies of Andean inhabitants to profit from these resources in a sustainable fashion.

In this context, the "Encuentro CONDESAN 2010" marked CONDESAN's first biannual meeting with researchers, decision-makers, and various organizations, providing a space for analysis and discussion on climate change, innovation in agricultural systems, hydrological environmental services, and the importance of collective action for managing natural resources, among other topics (Figure 1).

The approval of CONDESAN's new Road Map 2011–2015 is the conclusion of its latest evolution process: CONDESAN today is an independent regional research for development platform, disengaged from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and its host center, the International Potato Center (CIP). The Road Map marks the strategic route for CONDESAN's next 5 years of work as of 2011, with a view to continue contributing to knowledge and sustainable development of the Andes as a multistakeholder platform, with regional research for development initiatives.

Challenges of the Andean territory

The combined effects of the increasing number of investment projects that consider natural capital as a strategic asset, global environmental change, the expansion of large-scale extractive industries, and the evolution of political, economic, and social integration processes on multiple scales will generate unequally distributed restrictions and opportunities for the different human communities living in the Andean region.

The Tropical Andes are home to the most extensive and diverse tropical mountain ecosystems in the world. These are fragile systems, subject to the effects of climate change and the dynamics of land use and transformation. Agroecosystems that constitute a large portion of the Andean territory are equally vulnerable and face similar problems.

It is imperative to analyze the relations between social and environmental systems in order to have a better understanding of the degree of vulnerability of rural Andean populations. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain a critical approach regarding the significant differences existing among the inhabitants of rural areas.

Aside from mining, intensive exploration of new water sources, infrastructure megaprojects, energy generation projects, the production of biofuels, and the expansion of commercial crops under intensive schemes are generating alterations in the ecosystems and changes in the use of land. These dynamics mobilize regional economic resources but also affect the most vulnerable and least prepared Andean populations.

These extractions and related negotiation systems are becoming more and more distant from the control of people living in the Andes. This forces us to pay attention to the generation of relevant information that facilitates the creation of dialogue spaces between productive sectors, both public and private, local governments, national planning bodies, and local populations.

Likewise, we are aware of a tendency in the region towards polarization in political postures and strategies, all of which has generated tensions as well as alliances between governments. These tendencies have effects on the dynamics of regional organisms such as the Andean community (CAN) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which are spaces where debate is possible—and necessary—about the environmental, economic, and social challenges that the Andean population faces.

On the national scale, the dynamics of social movements anticipates a strengthening of their presence and participation in a context where increases in social inequality and in the number of conflicts associated with the access, use, and distribution of natural resources and the benefits resulting from them are expected. A broad spectrum of answers from both Andean states and civil society is required. These should explicitly include environmental issues on the political, economic, and development agendas. The objective is to find mechanisms to guarantee the provision of ecosystem goods and services in the long run.

At the subnational level, it is expected that these processes will be accompanied by an increasingly decentralized environmental governance structure, with

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FIGURE 1 Encuentro CONDESAN 2010: an opportunity to consolidate the work and relationship with our allies and partners. (Photo by Paula Herrera, CONDESAN photo archive)



community organizations, local governments, and the private sector more interested in the strategies for conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

Much is at stake. That is why CONDESAN's Road Map 2011–2015 suggests interventions with a regional focus that articulate the interests of citizens, social organizations, and local, subnational, and national governments.

CONDESAN's response

CONDESAN has evolved as a regional organization focusing on issues concerning sustainable development and environmental management. Its activities help to broaden knowledge about natural resources and the way they are used in the Andes and provide spaces for reflection and consultation among Andean communities, civil society, local governments, and national and regional policymakers.

CONDESAN is renowned for its ability to generate regional views and to position, on the public agenda, the main challenges in environmental management that cut across political and administrative boundaries. CONDESAN has a mission to mobilize the wealth of the Andes, in order to overcome poverty and social exclusion. It seeks to create and share information and knowledge about the environment in Andean rural societies, to promote policy dialogues with local actors, national governments, and regional organisms, and to strengthen Andean human and institutional capital in order to promote new leaders for sustainable development on the Andes.

We acknowledge that Andean reality is very complex and multidimensional; hence, we must prioritize our actions. The basic mandate of CONDESAN aims at research for development in 2 dimensions:

1. From a biophysical perspective, it focuses on the provision of natural resources and their dynamics
2. From a socioeconomic perspective, it prioritizes the use of these resources by communities and the effect on their wellbeing.

The mandate of CONDESAN guarantees that the products of research become available through dissemination, capacity building, and political dialogue at different scales, from regional to local. For the period 2011–2015, CONDESAN has decided to focus its analysis and interventions in 2 main areas:

1. Global changes and their effects on the region

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2. The dynamics of rural societies in the Andean countries.

Focus 1: Global changes and its effects

It is strategic for CONDESAN to focus its efforts on understanding and assessing the course and impact of hydrological, biological, and climatic changes in the Andes. It is imperative to understand the social processes that contribute to these changes and how Andean rural societies respond to them. Likewise, it is strategic to acknowledge that Andean production systems will be altered and affected, which is why understanding their vulnerability is fundamental to implementing mitigation and adaptation actions.

Focus 2: Dynamics of rural Andean societies

As a response to environmental change, increasingly rapid globalization, and the influence of the market in the global economy, rural sectors in Andean countries are experiencing a series of changes whose nature is associated with the heterogeneous circumstances of articulations with markets. The new dynamics generated in this context present the need for new perspectives on rural development in which promotion of the production and transfer of modern technologies are necessary but not sufficient conditions.

New approaches to rural issues recognize that the pursuit of social change as a new understanding of the linkages between urban and rural areas is very important, as well as understanding of the flows that occur between different populations and altitudes. This diversity is characteristic of the region throughout the 7 Andean countries.

CONDESAN considers success in the processes of social capital building, improvement in organization and institution building, and political commitment to natural resource development and management to be particularly important. It recognizes the importance of understanding social, environmental, and economic conditions that contribute to perpetuate diverse patterns of poverty and vulnerability in rural Andean societies.

Planning our action strategies for 2011–2015

CONDESAN seeks to improve the decision-making processes associated with managing resources at local, national, and regional levels. This requires a focus on strategic actions of research and synthesis, communication, policy, and capacity development.

Research and synthesis: Research and synthesis actions aim to facilitate the process of generating new information and knowledge from collective action research for development. This includes actions that seek to analyze and synthesize key themes of sustainable development in the Andes, as well as providing opportunities for exchange and discussion among the academic, political, and development communities, ensuring free access to and use of information and evidence generated by these research processes.

Communication and policy advocacy: Communication and policy advocacy actions promote the use of information generated and evidence gathered by the research process, where CONDESAN also supports policy- and decision-making processes at local, national, and regional levels. This includes actions to communicate information through adequate media and formats.

Capacity development: Capacity development actions are related to identifying the needs of capacity building, the development of forums and workshops to meet the needs identified, and the establishment of mechanisms of interlearning. This also involves actions to support regional capacity development initiatives in the field of sustainable development and the implementation of internships and fellowships.

CONDESAN's areas of work

Three institutional areas are formed from the strategies described in CONDESAN's Road Map 2011–2015: Biodiversity, Andean Basins, and Livelihoods. To fulfill its institutional goals, CONDESAN also maintains a vehicle that supports strategic communication and information actions: InfoAndina.

(1) Biodiversity: Knowledge and information are generated to support territorial planning actions so as to ensure the integrity of Andean ecosystems and the provision of ecosystem benefits and services to rural Andean societies that depend on them.

Applied research initiatives are developed to integrate relationships between human and environmental systems in a conceptual framework that supports decision-making at different scales. We consider it essential to understand and influence territorial governance processes at local, national, and regional levels where there are barriers to achieving the wellbeing of rural Andean societies and the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity.

A particular focus will be on ecosystem processes and functions that generate and maintain biodiversity (eg storage and carbon sequestration), the sustainable use and management of biodiversity, and the impacts of environmental change on ecosystems, communities, and species. A further aim is to promote inclusion and proper assessment of biodiversity in development processes.

Finally, there is support for the implementation of various regional

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strategies associated with the protection and management of biodiversity, in particular the Regional Strategy on Biodiversity for Tropical Andean Countries (ERB) and the High Andean Wetlands Strategy.

(2) Andean basins: The aim is to promote soil and water management from a holistic perspective, through the generation of information, the development of methodological tools, capacity building, and the creation of spaces for reflection and dialogue that contribute to Andean basin management involving the public, the private sector, and civil society and that reconcile various interests to the higher purposes of resource conservation and use to alleviate poverty.

The focus is on generating knowledge about Andean hydrology and how it is impacted by global change. A further focus is on consolidating and sharing knowledge about benefit-sharing mechanisms generated by hydrological environmental services and promoting political dialogue. It will also support the implementation of the Andean Strategy for Integrated Water Management, the High Andean Wetlands Strategy, and national policies, creating conditions for the institutionalization and implementation of integrated management of water resources in Andean basins.

(3) Livelihoods: The livelihoods approach is a tool of analysis developed to improve understanding of the livelihood strategies of the poorest, in order to define, propose, and reinforce poverty reduction strategies. Through this approach, we seek to learn how to access resources ("active" or "capital"), not only to understand how people face poverty, but also to know to what extent the perceptions of wellbeing and poverty they have are related to their life decisions and strategies, and to learn what skills they possess to improve their quality of life, so as to build the capabilities needed to address the social and environmental conditions that produce poverty.

This area seeks not only to analyze different activities undertaken for income as a basis of livelihood but also to understand noneconomic factors involved in achieving wellbeing. The aim is to identify and analyze all the resources that generate skills for a better quality of life and the risk factors to be considered when managing these resources, taking into account the way of life that people have defined. This also involves analysis of the institutional and policy environment that facilitates or hinders the wellbeing desired by the population.

The main objective is to analyze the environment (social, institutional, political, and economic) that structures access to resources and the conditions and trends affecting rural societies (endurance and vulnerability) in the Andes, to propose policy recommendations, and to help strengthen local and national institutions.

(4) InfoAndina: The main objective of InfoAndina is to use different communication and information tools and strategies to help improve the quality of life of rural Andean societies. This involves research on, as well as development and implementation of, methodologies, communication products, software, information services, and promotion of initiatives for open access to information.

Interlearning processes that link evidence with the process of making public policy decisions are promoted. InfoAndina is responsible for the construction and maintenance of spaces for the exchange of experience and knowledge between academic networks, activists and implementers, and decision-makers.

CONDESAN's principles

As an organization committed to the sustainable use of natural resources for social transformation, CONDESAN works in partnerships and also acts independently with public, economic, and social authorities. Managing its resources with efficiency and transparency, it accounts for its actions in terms of its directives and to cooperating institutions, partners, and donors. As a pluralistic organization, it recognizes diversity and promotes innovation and solidarity. CONDESAN follows international standards to ensure responsible, efficient, and sustainable management.

CONDESAN aspires to be recognized as the most effective Andean platform articulating the efforts of multiple actors at different levels. It offers alternatives to the Andean people in order to integrate their development strategies into the environment so they can benefit from the economic opportunities arising from the preservation of biodiversity, secure their food, understand the processes of environmental and sociopolitical change, and participate in the design of adaptation strategies that enable them to improve their wellbeing.

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