MULTINATIONAL FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY TOURISM IN ECUADOR (FEPTCE)

Ecuador

Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to 'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize', a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Multinational Federation of Community Tourism in Ecuador (Federacion Plurinacional de Turismo Comunitario del Ecuador - FEPTCE) brings together indigenous communities across Ecuador that offer tourism, guiding and lodging services. The initiative has especially targeted the country’s indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, peasant, and montubio (mestizo) communities, who are traditional stewards of Ecuador’s cultural and natural heritage, but who typically suffer from economic marginalization, high infant mortality rates, illiteracy, and out-migration from rural communities, among many other socioeconomic challenges.

With its roots in the late-1980s, the federation currently brings together 106 community-based initiatives (giving 33,689 direct beneficiaries, as estimated in 2009.) The reintroduction of traditional land management practices for improved agriculture has supplemented support for ecotourism initiatives.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2006

FOUNDED: 2002

LOCATION: Throughout Ecuador

BENEFICIARIES: 106 member communities

BIODIVERSITY: reforestation of 2,000 hectares
For over 500 years, indigenous peoples, Afro-Ecuadorians, peasants and montubios (mestizos) have been the stewards of the environment and ecosystems in rural Ecuador. Sustainable land management strategies have been handed down from generation to generation through a rich culture and tradition that emphasizes a strong conservation ethic. Today, indigenous communities in Ecuador suffer from high infant mortality rates, illiteracy, out-migration from communities, a lack of primary health care, malnutrition, a lack of employment and income-generating opportunities, housing shortages, and a range of other social and economic problems. These are further exacerbated by environmental challenges such as low soil productivity, environmental contamination by large-scale mining activities, deforestation, overgrazing, the indiscriminate use of agro-chemicals, and pollution of water resources.

Preserving culture and nature through ecotourism

In response to these challenges, indigenous, peasant, Afro-Ecuadorian and montubio communities in Ecuador have come together since the late 1980s to coordinate cultural and ecotourism activities in a manner that provides for community wellbeing, the protection of ancestral territories, cultural preservation, and conservation of the environment. Federacion Plurinacional de Turismo Comunitario del Ecuador (FEPTCE) is a multinational federation of indigenous communities that offer tourism, guiding and lodging services. The organization is incorporated as a legally registered non-profit organization that brings together community tourism initiatives of diverse peoples settled in the three continental regions of Ecuador.

FEPTCE emerged in the late 1980s to provide an alternative indigenous community development model which prioritizes cultural integrity and identity above the prevailing “mercantilist vision of power” in Ecuador. The initiative was also a response to the historical and ongoing appropriation of indigenous lands by the government and those holding power. Among the original architects of the initiative are Tarquino Tapuy, an indigenous Kichwa Amazonian from the community of Capirona, and members the communities of Runatupari, Ricancie, and Agua Blanca. Membership in the federation has grown incrementally, with 106 initiatives now participating based on a shared vision of sustainable development.

Priority objectives and fields of work

FEPTCE’s main goals are to promote and strengthen community tourism initiatives nationally and internationally and to improve the quality of life of communities through sustainable development and the maintenance of cultural identity. The group’s vision for the next 15 years is community tourism as a sustainable activity which generates economic benefits for the communities involved and contributes to the conservation of the natural heritage and the strengthening of cultural and ethnic diversity.

The federation’s key objectives are organizational strengthening, cultural revitalization, management of indigenous territory, and community-based economic development. FEPTCE aims to consolidate a strong organizational structure that will allow it to make decisions on the basis of consensus and a collective vision, to resolve internal conflicts with autonomy and independence, and to weave a local, regional and national organizational structure that provides a basis for claiming indigenous rights across rural Ecuador.

The objective of cultural revitalization is designed to maintain and bolster the ancestral principles and values that sustain indigenous community co-existence with “Pachamama”, or Mother Earth. FEPTCE endeavors to reclaim indigenous symbols and to retrieve ancient wisdom and techniques in architecture, medicine, agriculture, and cultural expressions such as dance, music, rituals, myths, tales and legends.

The objective of managing indigenous territories is an ongoing process of restoration and the revitalization of traditional land use management including mounds, “pukaras”, “tambos”, paths, terraces,
and stone walls. This objective is inclusive of efforts to protect indigenous territory from harmful extractive activities by offering alternative proposals for land use based on the communal management of nature and cultural heritage and the demarcation of indigenous community territory. Part and parcel of this is a determination to ensure food security and sovereignty for member communities, as well as demanding collective rights to employ ancestral land management techniques and the cultivation of traditional crops.

Finally, FEPTCE has the objective of integrating and strengthening community economies through collective work and the redistribution of revenues to develop new community initiatives and projects, particularly for vulnerable segments of society.

**Strategies for growth and sustainability**

FEPTCE is currently operating under a five-year plan, which outlines its legal framework, strategies for communications, marketing and for organizational strengthening, tourism products, credit services, and key principles for natural and cultural heritage. The larger strategy of FEPTCE has three phases. In the first phase, actions are aimed at creating a process of institutional strengthening and establishing a basis on which FEPTCE can function as a strong, widely-represented organization that is recognized at the national and international levels for quality community tourism management. The second phase focuses on boosting the quality of community tourism as a product, where success will be measured by changes in the number of visitors to community projects. Actions in this phase aim to achieve increased autonomy for FEPTCE, as this process will ideally generate resources, expand into new markets for community tourism, and consolidate internal organizational structures. In the third phase, the objective is to make community-managed tourism in Ecuador a sustainable, self-financed and autonomous business, which offers quality products and the strategic positioning of community tourism nationally and internationally.
FEPTCE provides guidance to communities interested in developing self-managed community tourism proposals. Guidance takes the form of training in all areas of tourism management, from institutional organization to marketing, and technical expertise to legal counsel. The federation serves as a resource for communities as they navigate the preparation, management and implementation of tourism projects. This guidance extends into environmental management and income diversification activities. From decades of experience, the federation retains a large amount of technical guidance and expertise on the design and implementation of projects in crafts, farm management, and land-use management planning.

Tenets of participation and cultural preservation

Consultations are provided to communities that become part of the federation. From the beginning of the project design, the federation provides advice on organizational strengthening, making decisions by consensus and on the basis of a shared vision, and resolving internal conflicts with autonomy and independence. Communities are also supported in cultural revitalization and conservation, not just as cultural symbols or totems – though this is done too through dance, music, rituals, myths, tales and legends – but also in guiding the architecture of projects in health, agriculture and community infrastructure. This rejuvenation of traditional wisdom forms the basis of alternative development models.

Land use planning and livelihoods diversification

Activities also include guidance on the reintroduction of traditional land management practices and strategies for conservation and sustainable development, such as the use of ‘sacred places’ like the tola, pukaras, terraces and stone walls. Communities are given information on how to protect their territory from incursions by extractive activities and industries, with alternative land management plans that are bolstered by the strength of community consensus and a guiding orientation of respect for natural and cultural heritage. Land use planning activities further involve delimitation of indigenous territory, workshops and training on ensuring food security and sovereignty, enforcing collective or common property rights, and traditional crop management techniques.

Land use planning is closely connected to FEPTCE activities in sustainable development of the local economy and poverty reduction efforts. Local development projects to improve income prospects attempt to integrate the most vulnerable and economically marginalized segments of the local population. Most alternative livelihood projects are offshoots of the community tourism industry: craft-making, tourism services, and guides, for example.

“Policy-makers should accept their responsibility to reduce poverty and support the development of communities. Promoting community tourism is one alternative development solution. Governments that acknowledge the needs of local communities, those who think and act according to equity concerns, will gain the respect of their people.”

Galo Villamil Gualinga, President, FEPTCE
Biodiversity conservation and sustainable use is an underlying principle of FEPTCE’s work. In addition to comprehensive reforestation projects, where native tree species were used to reforest over 2,000 hectares of land, FEPTCE has been active in over 25,000 hectares of land to protect threatened flora and fauna and to conserve a natural heritage that serves as the backbone of community-based ecotourism.

The federation has also been able to reduce unsustainable fishing practices, as well as the hunting and poaching of threatened endemic species. Community-based tourism has provided a viable alternative to the indiscriminate exploitation of natural, non-renewable resources.

Biodiversity conservation and land management efforts are based on the recovery and reintroduction of indigenous and ancestral knowledge and technologies. Sustainable use strategies have enabled communities to diversify their economic activities, resulting in additional income, renewed cultural expression, stronger community bonds, and better living conditions.

Socioeconomic impacts

According to Ecuador’s 2001 census, over 65 percent of the rural population in Ecuador suffers from poverty, while 30 percent suffer from extreme poverty. These numbers are even higher if poverty is measured according to unmet basic needs and services. The incidence of poverty among indigenous peoples is chronic and is greater than for the rest of the population – 32 percent higher than the national average.

The primary beneficiaries of FEPTCE’s work are families living in the 106 member communities. This includes 33,689 direct beneficiaries, as identified from the federation’s Institutional Strengthening Project, Organizational Development and Community Tourism Legal Framework developed in 2009. FEPTCE has been uniquely successful in generating a national and global market for community-based tourism initiatives in Ecuador.

Improved community wellbeing

Through community tourism operations, FEPTCE members have achieved greater wellbeing and are advancing viable sustainable development solutions. The socioeconomic impacts of FEPTCE’s work have included: improved social cohesion and strengthening at the socio-organizational level; improved community infrastructure, including roads in and out of communities to transport goods and visitors; greater access to health services; the creation of jobs, both directly through tourism services and indirectly through the sale of handicrafts and agricultural products; renewed appreciation for and use of medicinal plants and traditional medicine; greater appreciation at the community level of the importance of biological and agricultural diversity to community wellbeing; and greater understanding of the value of collective memory regarding land and sustainable natural resource management.

Improved community access to education and healthcare has been an equally important outcome of the work of FEPTCE. In 2005, the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (Ecuador headquarters) conducted a comparative econometric study on the impact of community tourism on Kichwa indigenous communities in the Amazonian province of Napo. The study found that communities engaged in ecotourism increased access to education by over 50 percent and access to health care by 70 percent. Tourism not only provides economic benefits to the poor, but also gives them pride in their culture, a better understanding of the natural environment and its economic value, and helps to reduce economic vulnerability by providing a diversified income source.
POLICY IMPACTS

A key branch of the FEPTCE mandate is dedicated to informing policy and awareness-raising among relevant stakeholders on the rights and entitlements of indigenous communities. While the primary objective is to position community tourism as a viable development alternative for indigenous autonomy across Ecuador, the federation is dedicated to informing clear and favorable public policies which encourage investment by the Ecuadorian government in sustainable livelihoods and environmental conservation, with indigenous communities positioned as stewards. Community tourism provides a vehicle for raising national and international awareness about indigenous identity and rights and the imperative of environmental conservation.

FEPTCE is currently an advisory body of the Ministry of Tourism and each community, regionally, maintains agreements with regional governments. In March, 2010, after extensive lobbying and advocacy by FEPTCE, Ecuador established standardized rules and instructions for community tourism initiatives. The concept of community tourism is now firmly rooted as part of the Strategic Tourism Development Plan in Ecuador, PLANDETUR 2020. This planning tool was designed recently, in a participatory manner, by the Ministry of Tourism.

The key element of project sustainability has been the participation and ownership of the federation by local communities. Local leadership and volunteers have been instrumental in providing the federation with both vision and in sustaining the organization. FEPTCE has signed agreements with Ecuador’s Secretary of Peoples and Social Movements and Citizen Participation, as well as with several municipal governments and regional government bodies, which have contributed to the initiative's long-term sustainability.

“Community tourism improves the quality of life of local people and is an economic alternative which enables the sustainable management of natural resources. People and the environment both benefit.”

Galo Villamil Gualinga, President, FEPTCE
The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the UN’s global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life.

The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature and resilient communities.

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