Civil society connections set Uruguay on a greener path

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Photo credit: ECCOSUR

Trade law professor Maria Leichner has long believed in the power of connections: between ideas, institutions, policies, and people.

The bridge-building that has been her trademark since she first worked in Argentina's foreign affairs department has turned into an engine of sustainable development in Uruguay.

Fundación Ecos Uruguay, the civil society organization that Leichner founded and leads, has spearheaded an initiative to foster links between individuals and groups working to meet the goals of the three Rio Conventions – on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification.

Through a venture financed by the Global Environment Facility, Ecos has worked to create opportunities for environmental and policy leaders to collaborate on ways to meet Uruguay's obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification.

The ECCOSUR project, whose acronym stands for Espacios de Coordinación de las Convenciones de Río, began in 2018 with a simple goal: to set Uruguay on a sustainable path toward green growth.

It was expressly designed to draw upon the transformative power of connection to help Uruguay fulfill its international commitments – charting a new course by building links between public and private institutions, sharing information amongst diverse stakeholders, and raising awareness about ways to address overlapping environmental challenges.

"You cannot make meaningful progress when climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity are fragmented. The policies have to be integrated," said Leichner, who is Vice Chair of the GEF CSO Network. "We created a space to address them together, and doing so has put the country on a much better path."

Uruguay's economy depends heavily on natural resources. Roughly 85 percent of its land is dedicated to livestock and crop production, and much of that is in private hands. This has made it critical for government, industry, and civil society to work together to advance sustainable land management practices.

ECCOSUR was created to support this process, and to help Uruguay move toward the full adoption of the legal and policy frameworks the Rio conventions called for.

It brought together those with interests in the process to create an effective action plan, led by a steering committee with representatives of 11 public, private, and civil society institutions.

Leichner said the early going was sometimes difficult, as party politics and entrenched interests could cause divisions. Some of the participants lived as little as one kilometer apart and yet had never met, while others working on separate environmental conventions had never sat around the same table. Instead, they often competed with one another for government support and resources.

That soon changed, however.

"Within the first two years, people inside ECCOSUR understood it was possible to work together," she said. "When the people connected, it immediately led to productive actions. And today, many of the organizations that that we invited to work in the ECCOSUR, they're working together on many, many projects."

These include new protected areas and a biological corridor that extends from Uruguay's east to west. Among ECCOSUR's other benefits is the Observatory of Conventions, a knowledge platform to support ongoing work on the conventions.

The practice of working across silos and raising government ministries' awareness about environmental issues and viewpoints has had lasting results in Uruguay.

"Now the challenge is to do this on a global scale: to put people and the environment together, and to pursue harmonized policies," Leichner said. "It doesn't work when we see on one side the economy and on the other side the environment. We need to put it all together. That has been my work for 20 years and I am still working on that."



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