

Swiss Conference on «Water and Light»

The Centro Lationoamericano-Suizo (CLS-HSG) had the pleasure of organizing the first Swiss Conference on «Water and Light: Managing Strategies to Scale Up Sustainable and Environmental Projects in Colombia» at the University of St.Gallen on September 3 and 4, 2012.

From September 3 to 4, 2012, the Swiss-Latin American Center of the University of St.Gallen (CLS-HSG) welcomed scholars and practitioners from a variety of disciplines to the first Swiss Conference on «Water and Light: Managing Strategies to Scale Up Sustainable and Environmental Projects in Colombia.» In a very fertile dialogue between speakers and audience, significant questions were addressed on the potential of scaling up socially and environmentally sustainable projects, and on the role social entrepreneurs play in these processes. This team building event provided an opportunity to discuss scaling up efforts of different actors and institutions, and is meant to be the starting point of an ongoing interdisciplinary cooperation.

Although it was clear to the participants that science and technology do play a key role in innovations that shall help us to cope with social and environmental challenges, the managerial and institutional factors are fundamental to the diffusion and success of new technologies and practices. The alignment of public endeavors and keen managerial performance are therefore required to scale up well-conceived innovations, in order to bring about the desired effects and reach a substantial population. Paradoxically, while Colombia is one of the countries in the world with the greatest biodiversity and water resources, parts of the population still do not have access to drinking water in spite of the state's constitutional obligation to provide such access. Even though progress has been made in this respect as well in the supply of other natural resources and public utilities, the conditions are far from optimal. Governments can certainly lead many projects oriented to those aims, yet one of its important tasks is to guarantee a legal framework that creates incentives for action and commits the whole set of social actors, e.g. local communities, domestic associations, academic institutions as well as profit and non-profit organizations. Scaling up

processes thus benefit from both top-down and bottom-up strategies, and demand major efforts to induce behavioral change, aiming to some extent at «changing the mind-set.»

Speakers insisted on the necessity to shift entrepreneurial behavior and to put human beings in the center of the economic agenda. Arising social entrepreneurs face the challenge of needing to behave business-like although many private sector tools are not well suited to their business context, as these strategies focus on economic performance rather than sustainability. Strategy making should not limit itself to a mechanistic approach, but also rely on intuition. Contextual factors must be taken into account, since every system has its own values. Furthermore, affective and behavioral components should complement cognitive processes in decision-making in order to prevent that existing path dependencies slow down the scaling up process. To create a market at the base of the pyramid where there is currently no money to make, it is crucial to understand the gaps between emerging and industrialized countries. That is why social entrepreneurs must adopt a transcultural strategy and take a long-term perspective that goes beyond immediate personal benefit. Initiative and commitment are central factors for successful social entrepreneurship, as can be shown by the example of Promigas in Colombia which, by using international cooperation and World Bank funding, gives loans to its customers and thereby taps into a new market.