

Ecuador Program Summary

The recent wave of constitutional and legal reforms has left Ecuador's local and national governments scrambling to adjust to major changes in responsibilities, power and structures. The new constitution, passed in September 2008 by the national assembly, reconfigures the country's power structure, creates new levels of government in the regions, empowers specific groups to have autonomous governing structures and shifts responsibilities between national and local levels of government. Some powers will be devolved to the local level with others redistributed from the local level to the national level.

The national government and the assembly are currently in the process of finalizing the specific division of responsibilities, amid varying levels of opposition, concern and confusion. While this is being clarified, local leaders and citizens – often lacking information and background on these issues – are tasked with complying with the national government's new regulations and procedures. With so many new responsibilities, changes and pressure on the government and constituents to begin acting immediately, local governments face the urgent challenge of delivering services and continuing to govern while this transition slowly unfolds.

In October 2009, the International Republican Institute (IRI) began a program to help establish links between government officials and local citizens to promote a better understanding of changes in government processes and to strengthen their communications and interactions with each other.

IRI will initially work in Ambato, Ibarra and Loja with local partner *Participación Ciudadana* (Citizen Participation). IRI and *Participación Ciudadana* will hold events in each city to deepen the understanding of the constitutional changes and foster dialogue between government representatives and citizens. These events will allow for open discussion about the new government structure and how it will impact local organization's ability to respond to citizens' needs.

Following the initial round of conferences, IRI will monitor the on-going effect the changes have on improved governance and constituent awareness. A second round of events will be held to highlight the outcomes and to further deepen understanding of the new legal directives and their impact on governance in each city.

As in all programming, IRI will draw on local and regional experts to work with the communities to strengthen their voice and role in the democratic process. The skills learned will enable the communities to improve their local governance operations and improve communication and coordination with each other and government officials.

In each of the three cities, IRI will sponsor a weekly radio talk show where citizens can directly question their community and government leaders and officials can discuss important issues affecting the community.

Since the voting age in Ecuador has been lowered to 16, engagement of younger Ecuadorians in the political process is essential to strengthening Ecuador's democracy. To engage these future leaders in the political process, IRI will work with university students to teach them about effective governance practices.