

tal, according to whether neo-liberal elites or the populations of Cochabamba and Bolivia keep the upper hand. Water delivery in Cochabamba remains an important political issue. The success of the water war against Bechtel and the public-popular management have massively boosted Bolivia's social movements fighting the neo-liberal policies of the national government in La Paz. Transforming a long-standing culture of neglect and corruption into a functioning public-popular alternative based on effectiveness, participation and social justice, is a task that will take a long time and will have to overcome many hurdles.

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THE VENEZUELAN EXPERIENCE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR PEOPLE-CENTRED DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION SERVICES

By Santiago Arconada Rodríguez

PART OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS

In February 1999, President Hugo Chávez Frías took office in Venezuela. Between March and April he named the team in charge of the water sector and in May this team, responsible for drinking water and sanitation services, organised a workshop of veteran social activists. The delegates had varying experience and were trade unionists, students, environmentalists, co-operative movement activists, academics, and came from neighbourhood and cultural groups. Their goal was to outline what, from June 1, 1999, was known as the Communal Management of HIDROCAPITAL, the water company of the capital, Caracas.

At that workshop, they discussed the experience of the so-called Water Technical Tables (Mesas Técnicas de Agua) during the municipal government of Aristóbulo Istúriz (1993 - 1996) in Caracas, particularly in the Antímano and El Valle neighbourhoods. Some elements of this experience were selected and discussion of them generated a proposal to tackle problems concerning drinking water and sanitation.

This analyses the development of that proposal in the country after its first five years of existence.

A COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONAL PROPOSAL

Problems with the drinking water and sanitation service included not only the lack of service, but also the chaos of the water network due to the lack of urban planning in Venezuelan cities. This is particularly true in Caracas and the rest of the cities of the capital area that were under the responsibility of HIDRO-CAPITAL.

From the start, the proposal of the Water Technical Tables and Communal Councils was intended to re-establish the involvement of citizens.

Until those first meetings, the relationship between communities and the public drinking water and sanitation utility (in this case HIDROCAPITAL) was limited to demonstrations that blocked streets and occupied offices to protest about HIDROCAPITAL's inability to provide drinking water. (The Communal Management of HIDROCAPITAL began in the summer of 1999, after the serious drought in 1998 caused by "El Niño".) Those first meetings acknowledged that there was no option other than communal organisation to solve the serious problems affecting so many places.

The Water Technical Tables were a way of co-ordinating all the knowledge the community had about their water network with the human, technical and financial resources that belonged to them through their public water company. This was seen as necessary to harness the skills needed to solve the problems and the proposal suggested a huge change.

Dispensing with the patronising state model that substitutes citizens instead of supporting them, the Water Technical Table was, in practice, the citizens' response to the public water company on how to deal with any problem. Three tasks need to be done:

- a) the census - which should not be considered as pure accounting, but as an x-ray of the community that includes all references points to get an exact picture of the situation they face;
- b) the map - a drawing by the community of the way services are established in their area. By doing this there is a retrieval of the collective memory of the installation of the service. This allows everyone to understand the problems caused by the growth of the area, and the attempts to solve problems. This input is key to designing the solution. It also helps the public water company to understand better the water networks which were built by the people;
- c) the diagnosis – this step is simply the collective processing of the information to establish a diagnosis of the problem and to formulate a working plan for works, repairs and maintenance.

The communities which are organised into Water Technical Tables, together with the representatives of the public water company and officials of elected local government (mayors, councillors or neighbourhood boards) constitute a Water Communal Council.

Different information processes take place in those councils: from the various communities to the water company and the representatives of local government; from the water company and local authorities to the Water Tables; and among the Water Tables themselves. This information exchange increasingly empowers the communities.

The council has two main features: it is public and it meets regularly. This means that it is open to all citizens with no exclusions, and it meets at a regular time and in a place well known.

It has three main functions:

- a) It prioritises issues from all identified needs. Taking into account available resources, it establishes a working plan according to priorities established collectively.
- b) Organises programmes. Both the water company and the community take on commitments. An agenda for the workers is established and resources are allocated to each task.
- c) It follows up. The main task of the council is to exert social control over the public company. Meetings always start with the same questions: What have we agreed? What did we do? What didn't we do and why? And so on.

FIVE YEARS LATER

More than five years have passed now and the organisational proposal of the Water Technical Tables and Communal Councils has been adopted by almost all the public water companies of the country. Subsidiaries of HIDROVEN (head company) and the companies depending on the regional government have different ways of incorporating community participation.

Public water companies have experienced the transformation that comes from meeting their owners, the citizens. Communities that five years ago drew the first maps of their reality, and were mobilised by not having water in their taps, now formulate their problems in the context of the water situation in the region.

Wastewater has also been on the agenda and sanitation is acknowledged to be the most in need of an infrastructure overhaul in order to prevent disasters and tragedies. Investment in infrastructure in high-density neighbourhoods has also increased enormously.

Information in the hands of the community about the situation of their public water company, of the infrastructure and of the water sources on which they depend, has created a collective idea of future problems.

There has been a process of organising different areas of drinking water and sanitation service into co-operatives. Worker co-operatives are growing in the water sector as part of a process of eliminating intermediaries between those who do the work and the company that has to formulate, plan and inspect this work. They are also a sign of the increasing control of organised communities over their basic services. They have taken on diverse work such as collecting, treating, delivering and disposing of the water by means of networks throughout the whole country.

Some examples are particularly representative.

- a) In Caracas (the capital region), managed by the Water Communal Council of Antímano, the aqueduct has a cyclical pattern and cannot provide water to everyone at the same time. For the past five years, this council has been controlling the supply schedule to the area and trying out various methods to improve it. The way in which the community uses the council as a control tool over the water services is remarkable.
- b) In the State of Zulia, the Communal Council of Páez, is a municipality in which the majority of the population is the indigenous wayúu people. Its water system, which draws water from the Guasare River and sends it to all the settlements of the municipality, was working well below its capacity due to some unfinished repairs. Once the Water Communal Council was established, they carried out inspec-

tions in which the community realised that repairs were not done. Not only did they manage to get the service functioning with a bigger capacity, but also to organise a workers co-operative to operate the system.

- c) In the State of Sucre, the Communal Council of the Clavellino system is tackling serious management problems. The system conducts water from the north of the eastern Venezuelan massif to the peninsula of Araya and the city of Carúpano in Edo, Sucre and, through an underwater tube, to the islands of Coche and Margarita in the Edo, Nueva Esparta. The communal council is working to get consensus from the range of people who take water from this system and to find a solution to the many and diverse problems.

CONCLUSION

It would be easy to pretend that in the past five years all the problems and the chaos that affect the functioning of the diverse water networks have been solved. Very many kilometres of pipes have been built, but many more are still needed. The reality now is that the Venezuelan water service is increasingly in its citizens' hands and much more under their control than ever before. It is also the case that an increasing number of communities do not think any longer only in terms of having water or not in their taps, but in terms of managing their water sources.

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National coverage in drinking water and sanitation services in Venezuela 1998-2003

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Coverage drinking water (percentage of total population)	81.57	83.66	85.15	86.37	87.65	89.27
Coverage sewage collection (percentage of total population)	63.77	64.38	66.96	68.51	71.27	71.69

Water Technical Roundtables established (as of October 2004)

Water Utility	Water Technical Roundtables
HIDROANDES-BARINAS	9
HIDROANDES-TRUJILLO	10
HIDROCAPITAL	1.088
HIDROCARIBE	96
HIDROCENTRO	42
HIDROFALCON	144
HIDROLAGO	476
HIDROLLANOS	10
HIDROPAEZ	24
HIDROSUROESTE	41
HIDROLARA	24
AGUAS DE MONAGAS	29
AGUAS DE PORTUGUESA	2
Total	1995

Statistics from HIDROVEN, the Hydrologic Company of Venezuela and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources.