

Considering the categories of the right to water in a National Survey: a case from Nicaragua

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Abstract

The study covered the different categories of the right to water with the main objective of providing a diagnosis of the human right to water and sanitation in Nicaragua. This study provides additional information in such a way that enables all actors to demand, plan and implement actions oriented to successfully meeting the human right to water, not only in terms of infrastructure, but also in terms of availability, physical and economic access, quality, participation, non-discrimination and inclusion. In many cases, the lack of information regarding some of the dimensions of the right impedes the development and implementation of actions devoted to the improvement of this situation.

Introduction

The aim of this work is to develop the understanding by all stakeholders of the full meaning of the recognition of the human right to water, in order to demand additional information, plan and implement positive action regarding its implementation. In many cases, no information on some areas of law precludes actions to improve the situation and contribute to the sustainability of the systems. The work wants to be replicable, since it involves inserting additional elements of information gathering routines that already exist in most countries. Therefore, with a little extra effort, it is possible to extract important information to enhance compliance with the right of access to safe water and sanitation in each country.

Methods

1.350 households were surveyed in rural areas throughout the country (in total 91 communities in 32 municipalities in 10 departments and 2 autonomous regions have been covered). 67% of the surveys were answered by women and 33% by males. Together with the household survey, we applied a structured interview administered to 61 committees of Water and Sanitation (CAPS) covering 66 communities from 26 municipalities. Rural sub-sector was chosen as the most vulnerable in the country. Normally this type of survey does not include enough dimensions of the human right to water. Therefore, we designed a specific questionnaire for each household and one for the Committees on Water and Sanitation, which include the right dimensions.

Results and discussion

The sample of households provided water availability conditions more favourable than the national rural average (67% of households with internal or external pipe receives water every day), due to the presence of CAPS in all of them. However, despite the progress, to half the population is not possible to guarantee the continuity of water supply. Many households receiving 3 to 4 hours of water, especially if the supply is not daily, have serious difficulties to perform the tasks necessary to keep the home. Seven out of ten households do not exceed the consumption of 52 liters of water per person and day. Moreover, there are profound differences in the amount of water consumed by the communities, which confirms the great social and territorial inequalities in the distribution of water.

With regard to the causes that affect water availability, the households surveyed indicate environmental change factors (decrease of sources and drought), maintenance issues, and finally, poverty and neglect that are the most vulnerable.

Notwithstanding the importance of environmental factors, the CAPS highlight the shortcomings of projects and policies to develop both technological and physical resources in order to expand and improve water service.

The main negative impacts caused by the fact of carrying water are the loss of time that can be used to do domestic duties, together with the detriment of health of those entrusted to carry water daily, that is, women and girls and children, that also fall behind in carrying out their school homework.

As regards affordability, lower rates are in the communities served by the CAPS (U.S. \$ 2.00/month).

Despite this, one third of surveyed households assessed as high-paid monthly fee. This appreciation on the cost of the fee is directly influenced by the payment difficulties experienced by more than half of the households surveyed.

In some cases characterized by poverty and precarious access to water, the cost recovery actions of the committees reflect responses aimed at solving specific problems of maintenance rather than the development of water services; in these circumstances, there are no fixed subsidies from the government to ensure stability of the services.

The information on the national water law is also very low even for the members of the CAPS. Communities usually do not have much information on actions taken to claim about quality of water. The study shows that knowledge about the actions does not depend on the level of pollution they suffer, but on the level of organization and general information about water issues in their community.

The level of information from households on the terms of the quality of the water consumed and on control measures and hygienic practices to prevent disease should therefore be raised.

The quality of domestic water and sanitation represent, especially in rural areas, one of the main factors contributing to the spread of infectious diseases. Those who admit the presence of diseases caused by water quality mostly mention diarrhoeal diseases.

With regard to the involvement of people in local issues of water, higher rates of participation are recorded in communities organized by CAPS and Cooperatives.

With respect to participation, the people identify the role of women in community issues of water and CAPS recognize women participation in community organizations. However, this is not translated into the roles that women exercise in the CAPS.

In general, people recognize the leadership of the CAPS and identify their constitution as a result of the organization carried out by leaders. Members of the CAPS are usually seen as democratically selected in assembly–election.

As regards the sustainability of water resources, more than half of the population appreciate that the activities carried out are not sufficient to ensure sustainability and meet the short and medium term needs of families.

Conclusions

The main challenges of the CAPS are related to the most significant aspects that restrict the right to water: pollution of sources, lack of sewage treatment and sanitation systems, the low awareness of people to environmental degradation, management problems with the authorities and the challenges of economic and environmental sustainability. We emphasize that it is essential to work with a shared vision of what implies the right to water as such. We found that many people considered to have satisfied their access to water even with 1 hour per day of service, and under conditions of inequality. Of course, people lack of awareness hinders the possibilities to work for and claim the right to water. Therefore, to strengthen capacities and awareness of right holders becomes a key tool in all community processes. This has to be combined with the capacity building of duty bearers, especially the local government.

References

Coalition of Organizations for the Right to Water (2010). Study on Human Right to Water and Sanitation in Nicaragua.