

**STRENGTHENING WATER GOVERNANCE
IN THE BORDER BETWEEN COSTA RICA AND NICARAGUA**

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Abstract

In the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, 99% of the water supply services are managed by grassroots associations. With the support of the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, there is an on-going process for strengthening these associations as well as a joint working program with local institutions with competencies on this resource. It is intended to achieve real governance on water to ensure access of the whole population to a basic service, of high quality, as well as to provide adequate management that is sustainable through time. After 3 years of hard work, 85% of the associations, who benefice to more than 22,000 inhabitants in the area, have been benefitted and empowered, and new resources have been obtained.

Water, governance, coordination, marginality, empowerment, and cooperation.

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals established, as one of its goals for 2015, to reduce by half the number of people without access to drinking water. Currently, the population that suffers the most consequences is that impoverished population of rural areas which also lacks basic sanitation services. This problem is not always due to a lack of availability of the resource. Water resources are oftentimes available, but what makes access to drinking water difficult is an inadequate policy of water governance.

Water governance allows and needs the participation of the different actors involved in the management of this ecosystem's service. It must foster joint and negotiated decision-making among sectors of the government, private sectors, and local stakeholders. Such processes for decision-making, negotiation, and management also require having actors that have strengthened capacities and that have the necessary tools to participate with equal conditions.

In Costa Rica, this year the Ministry of Health promoted the creation of community aqueducts, managed jointly between the government and boards of appointed users. Afterwards, with the creation of the Costa Rican Institute of Aqueducts and Sewer Systems (AyA), rural aqueducts were

integrated to AyA, quickly developing throughout the sixties with the sponsorship of the Social Development and Family Assistance Fund, that has a strategy to fight poverty that includes the promotion of drinking water services for the rural population. Thus, AyA contributed with the project by providing design and technical services, and equipment and materials, while the community provided hand labor and land to install the aqueducts. Finally, AyA tried to establish a more direct relationship with the committees. Hence the Associations of Aqueduct Managers were created (ASADAS) (Umaña, C, Imbach, A. y Bartol P. 2009).

The regulations of ASADAS establish “duties and attributions” to “guide and actively participate with the community in the construction, management, operation, maintenance, and development of systems, including the preservation and conservation of water resources”. However, in rural communities with low development indexes, ASADAS carry on their management activities full of deficiencies, not only economic, that prove the need to have technical, training, and economic accompaniment.

This is the example of the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, where since 2007, the project “Sustainable Development of the Río Frío Basin” (Río Frío Project) is carried on, funded by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and managed by the National Biodiversity Institute of Costa Rica (INBio). This Project has ASADAS as the focal working group in the communities, managing the main eco-systemic service of the area: water. Organizations with which work is performed are 80% of the ASADAS in the area, and they are the ones that requested to join the working process.

Methods

During the initial stages, the Río Frío Project carried on different actions to contact ASADAS in its working area. The efforts were in two directions: on one hand, planning and execution of short term actions to cover up for needs previously identified together with the ASADAS in a quick participative diagnosis so that in the meantime, a comprehensive study may be performed through detailed surveys and field visits, to plan the necessary interventions at the medium and long term, and to contact other stakeholders involved in local water management (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Environment, municipalities, etc.).

There are five working lines:

1. Legalization of associations that were not legally constituted, which allows to obtain resources from grants of bank financing and to increase the possibilities for administrative development and service expansion. In this process, as per request of the inhabitants, support was provided to the creation of ASADAS in communities that did not have one already, giving way to a future with access to drinking water.

2. Training. At the beginning of the intervention, all the ASADAS mentioned that they did not have formal training, and that they only received information, attention to queries or a lecture every once in a while. For this purpose, Management and Basic Accounting handbooks are being developed for ASADAS, as well as training from ASADAS that have more experience and a longer trajectory to teach those with greater knowledge needs. In addition, it is coordinated with other national teaching institutions to give courses on plumbing, water potabilization, and legal framework, among others.

3. Improvement of the infrastructure and equipment purchasing: The water for all these communities comes from forest springs and underground reservoirs. Many of the investments were made many years ago, so the infrastructure has deteriorated due to the weather. It is necessary to provide support to these associations to achieve a correct water collection to ensure non-contaminated water from the beginning, as well as its correct treatment, storage, and distribution.

4. Quality of the water: A water analysis was performed in only 25% of the ASADAS; therefore, it was promoted to register all the ASADAS in the National Program for Water Quality Certification (that certifies the service provided by ASADAS according to several parameters), taking advantage of an initiative developed in the country.

5. Financial Sustainability: It is essential for the continuity of these organizations. Among all the factors, intervention in micro-measurement, invoicing, and management and accounting are deemed as a priority.

Results and discussion

After several years of work, there is still much to be done. However, so far great achievements have been reached in the described areas.

1. Legalization of the associations: 100% of the legalization of associations is achieved and is supported by the implementation of projects. More than 100 thousand dollars are provided once ASADAS become legal.

2. Training: Approximately 180 persons are trained with an equitable participation of women (49%) and men (51%). Moreover, it is important to highlight the strong participation of ASADAS with aqueducts still in construction but that are interested in their new functions.

3. Infrastructure and equipment: It is based on springs and water collection. Investments are made on new pipelines, new designs are made for the expansion of aqueducts, and support is provided to management and execution of the construction of new aqueducts (the latter will benefit approximately 2,000 people). Before planning the investment in infrastructure, all the aqueducts were mapped and an analysis on future demand was performed.

4. Quality of water: Coordination is carried on with MINSA and AyA to evaluate water analyses and to communicate results. A participation of 100% is achieved through the Water Quality Certification Program of AyA to ensure sustainability of the process through time. Plumbers are trained on water treatment and there is intervention on water collection.

5. Financial sustainability: Water meters were installed in the ASADAS that request it, and the capacities of managers and boards of directors of the ASADAS are strengthened.

Conclusions

Local communities, mainly in poor rural areas, are the main beneficiaries of a real governance of water, as well as the main affected parties when such governance is provided without any further support. Governance means inter-institutional coordination, joint planning, and capacity strengthening for stakeholders.

The working process that is being promoted by the Río Frío Project is successful due to the involvement of all the stakeholders and to the efforts addressed to promoting the roles of each one of them. Active participation in planning, execution, and assessment processes is a key factor to achieve local empowerment of water management and strengthened associations to perform functions correctly. In addition, it is very important to take into account the role of women in water management, as users and as a key component of an effective management if there is encouragement to prepare community women leaders with a capacity to manage, communicate, and work that can significantly contribute in the process towards real water governance.

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