



# Strengthening grassroots capacity with AQUACOL

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**Community-managed WATSAN in Colombia's rural areas is threatened by the ongoing armed conflict and neglect by government. AQUACOL, a network of community organizations, was set up to meet this need, and through the sharing of information and experience and joint training sessions AQUACOL supports water and sanitation services at the local level.**

Colombia's armed conflict has been blighting the lives of rural people for decades. Approximately 30 per cent of Colombia's population lives in rural areas, and these people therefore face enormous difficulties developing water and sanitation projects, especially when inhabitants and community leaders with knowledge of how to manage water and sanitation systems are driven from an area or even killed. Community-based organizations are responsible for 90.5 per cent of the water and sanitation services provision in these areas.

A common feature of community-based organizations in these rural areas is the limited support they receive from local, provincial or national government. Neither do these organizations have easy access to financial resources from international organizations, as most of these organizations' attention is concentrated on the fight against illegal armed forces. Only a few international organizations have understood that investments in water and sanitation can contribute to conflict resolution.

In order to cope without external support, a number of different organizations have been created, such as the Association of Community-based Water Supply and Sanitation Associations (AQUACOL is its acronym from Spanish). This association is a network established by community organizations with a view to supporting its members and, in its role of legitimate representative, defending their interests *vis-à-vis* the government.

## AQUACOL's establishment

The idea behind AQUACOL emerged from joint work between community leaders and CINARA, the Research and Development Institute on Water Supply, Environmental Sanitation and Water Resources Conservation at University del Valle.<sup>1</sup> Its formal establishment took place during the event AGUA 2000. AGUA is an event organized by CINARA once every two years, which gathers researchers, civil servants, academics and leaders from the water sector in Latin America, and other continents.

Two factors led to the establishment of AQUACOL. First, the realities concerning drinking water and sanitation services provision in rural areas were acknowledged: these included coverage rates in rural areas of Colombia of 45 per cent for water supply and 30 per cent for sewerage. AQUACOL was set up to respond to the needs faced by organizations responsible for these services.<sup>2</sup> Second, current legislation for organizations in charge of public services provision is biased towards urban areas. It disregards the reality in rural areas, in spite of these areas' significant social and demographic importance, their big needs and conflicts.

The philosophy underpinning AQUACOL can be summed up in the following concepts:

### Role

- Mutual learning leads to peer review and horizontal cooperation. It contributes to knowledge and shared

experience which nurtures grassroots empowerment.

- An association of community organizations has the capacity to influence public policy.
- Operation and maintenance costs are reduced through economies of scale. The acquisition of supplies and hire of specialized services take place collectively.
- Larger projects can be generated for network members.
- Different levels of understanding and development among the association's members can be put to good use in the form of advisory services among network members.

The rise of associations such as AQUACOL fills a gap that exists in the support of local communities. Even an institution like CINARA, playing the role of resource centre for the water and sanitation sector for the past 20 years, has limitations in supporting community-based water-supply organizations on a continuous basis. A Resource Centre can be defined as 'an organization or a network of organizations that provides independent support services to the water and sanitation sector, geared to making knowledge available to various target groups in a format they can use and tailored to specific information needs.'<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Institute has developed projects providing effective solutions to problems faced by communities. After these projects come to an end, however, the support that CINARA provides to the communities either becomes ad hoc or

is reduced to small interventions undertaken through AQUACOL. In many cases, these interventions do not satisfy all the community's needs and expectations.

Initially, the management team of AQUACOL made an inventory of the most important problems faced by its affiliated communities. Based on this information, it planned one-day visits to assess the local infrastructure and difficulties in every community. During those visits, communities requested support in certain areas and community leaders with more experience shared their knowledge and provided advice to improve the situation of communities. Some communities visited other communities who had initially provided the most valuable insight and recommendations.

The success of these activities revealed that training among communities has a huge potential to contribute to the sustainability of services in rural areas. For one thing, communities that are able to stand out in particular aspects inspire confidence in their peers. Such aspects include: efficient financial management, operation of pumping facilities, micro-catchment management, efficient water use, etc. Moreover, training delivered by communities is seen as trustworthy by their peers. This credibility is based on the experience of these lead communities, and the evidence demonstrated in their systems.

## Community Learning Centres

This background, and the important role played by the communities' 'expertise in learning project' on technology development, shaped the conditions for the establishment of four so-called Community Learning Centres in Water and Sanitation in the departments of Valle del Cauca and Cauca.

Numerous sector professionals, mayors and civil servants from different institutions in Colombia and abroad have visited the communities selected as learning centres, and the community leaders have taught them numerous lessons.

The emergence of the 'information society' offers an exceptional opportunity to value the information generated by these communities. Mike Powell has suggested that 'participation in the "information society" does not only

consist of accessing information; above all, it is the right to generate and to select the contents',<sup>4</sup> and these communities are an example of this approach.

The Community Learning Centres in Water and Sanitation are defined as spaces organized by the communities to share information and knowledge created horizontally. This knowledge comes from their cultural practices in water resources management and sanitation, and their daily experience in public services management. The Community Learning Centres are the result of the joint work of these organizations and related institutions that enable education and training to become horizontal activities between communities.

The selection of the first four centres was based on basic criteria agreed between the member organizations of AQUACOL. These include:

- being a member of AQUACOL;
- being easily accessible;
- expressing an interest;
- possessing an integrated vision of water systems management;
- and having an outstanding performance in a certain aspect of management.

The chosen community-based organizations are ACUASUR, Mondomo, Montebello and La Sirena. These communities have been managing their services in a sustainable manner for several years. Their administrative activities are clearly defined, and their operations are supported by a stable income. All communities are working in both the conservation of the micro-catchments that feed the systems, and the reduction of water losses.

In terms of infrastructure, ACUASUR, Mondomo and La Sirena have optimal conditions, with classrooms for education activities within their premises. All three organizations have offices and there is also a conference room in Mondomo. All organizations have hired personnel for operation, maintenance and administration of the systems. ACUASUR has a conventional treatment plant. La Sirena and Mondomo have multi-stage filtration plants (MSF). Montebello stands out in its activities for protecting the water micro-catchment.

The functions of a Community Learning Centre are:

- To share the information and knowledge available in and among the interested communities.
- To be in contact with all communities that visit it.
- To programme visits to communities that require advisory services.
- To promote participatory actions within the communities. This stimulates learning processes about their systems and increases the ownership.
- To channel the information demands of the communities and to transmit them to the relevant level.
- To generate the conditions needed to improve access to information and to update knowledge.
- To promote networking among community centres and other institutions present in the zone.
- To provide feedback to AQUACOL based on the organization's experience.

These resource centres directly benefit all 33 member organizations of AQUACOL, which serve 16,000 inhabitants. Moreover, the centres are also being visited by communities that do not belong to AQUACOL. The creation of community learning centres allows resource centres to expand their operational range due to the specialized advisory services they provide to community centres while the latter have a body to address whenever they are faced by community requests beyond their knowledge and experience. This experience can be extended to other zones of the country and different countries of Latin America that have similar conditions to those of Colombia.

### About the author

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### References

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- 3 IRC (2004)
- 4 Powell, Mike (2003) *Information Management for Development Organizations*, Oxford: Oxfam.