

# An Alternative Vision for Improving the Water Sector

Since 2009, the Platform for Public and Community Partnerships in the Americas has established public-community partnerships for water services in Uruguay, Bolivia and Colombia. These partnerships have enabled communities and public utilities to realize the human rights to water and sanitation by improving public management of water and sanitation systems. The presentation of Javier MARQUEZ VALDERRAMA, Lina MONDRAGÃ“N PEREZ and Bibiana SALAZAR RESTREPO. H2o 2016 April.

Public-Community Partnerships in Latin America

## AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR IMPROVING THE WATER SECTOR

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Since 2009, the Platform for Public and Community Partnerships in the Americas has established public-community partnerships for water services in Uruguay, Bolivia and Colombia. These partnerships have enabled communities and public utilities to realize the human rights to water and sanitation by improving public management of water and sanitation systems. These partnerships provide a democratic, sustainable and equitable alternative to water privatization, which is sweeping through the Americas and the rest of the world. This backgrounder describes these solidarity-based partnerships and the strategies used to develop them to help inspire other communities.

What is a public-community partnership for water and sanitation?

In this report, the term "public" signifies a commons-based management system, which treats water as belonging to no one, the sustainable management of water resources as the responsibility of all. Within a commons-based system, water services are provided on a not-for-profit basis.

Within this aspirational definition of "public", we favour models that are based on social control. In other words, decision making must be participatory, transparent and in the interest of all. Local self-governing water and sanitation systems constitute one form of public management. The community systems discussed in this report combine social and environmental needs to guarantee access to water and basic sanitation, to manage watersheds and protect local water sources. By documenting these practices we hope to illustrate how cooperative community organizing strategies in rural and urban areas have guaranteed access to water and sanitation.

The private sector operates on a for-profit basis that is inherently exploitative. Public-community partnerships are an alternative to public-private partnerships, which have privatized profits and socialized risks within the water and sanitation sector. They are also an alternative to poorly run state systems that are not accountable to local communities. While states have an obligation to ensure that the human rights to water and sanitation are guaranteed to all, state-run systems do not always meet the needs of communities.

Public-community partnerships strengthen the local and national capacity to engage communities, social movements, and workers by promoting processes of local and international cooperation based on solidarity and horizontal decision making. Public-community partnerships respect the autonomy of communities and have served to build capacity for independent systems of social, public and community water management. Through this model the community designs and promotes a strategy for cooperation based on their particular skills and the resources available. They seek to reduce dependency on international lending institutions and on international organizations that promote a commercialized system for basic water and sanitation services through loan conditionalities or other means. The partnerships provide opportunities for scientific, technical, cultural and political cooperation. They serve as a testing ground for the design of participatory and transparent planning in the provision of water and sanitation services.

A public-community partnership includes the following characteristics:

- It is an agreement between two or more parties to exchange expertise and experiences in order to improve and streamline public and community management of basic water and sanitation services within public utilities and community-run water services.
- It is a strategic and political tool that not only helps to improve the public administration of water and sanitation services, but also helps communities resist the privatization of their water and sanitation services by finding solutions within the public sector to strengthen public services.
- These partnerships may involve public utilities, independent community associations, organizations of alternative systems, and/or service professionals who do not necessarily belong to the same sector. Partnerships can be local, national or international in nature provided that the agreement is between two or more parties operating as equals, without hierarchy, and within a framework of mutual respect, reciprocity and solidarity.
- The partnership is a not-for-profit social agreement that precludes any form of commodification, commercialization or privatization of water (including outsourcing or subcontracting to private entities).
- All parties share the belief that water services are a fundamental human right and that water and sanitation should be managed as being part of the commons.

Public-community partnerships have served to:

- Improve efficiency in the management of services.

- Increase coverage and access to services.
- Strengthen public utilities and self-managed water systems.
- Develop human resources within the water and sanitation sector.
- Defend water resources and services from privatization in all its forms.
- Incorporate civil society and communities in the process of management and control.
- Build community cohesion by ensuring transparency and encouraging social control by enabling the participation of users, workers, water operators, unions, communities, local authorities, etc.

#### Who can participate?

Public-community partnerships can involve social or community organizations, public utilities, cooperatives, unions and public institutions that are involved in the management and operation of basic water and/or sanitation services at the local, national or international level. Partnerships may also involve state entities.

#### What types of partnerships exist?

Each partnership is unique as it is based on the needs of the parties involved and is adapted to different policy and regulatory environments.

Partnerships may take various forms. Their purpose may be technical, administrative, political, environmental or financial. To what degree and in what manner each party is involved will depend on the specific needs and characteristics of each organization. The agreements, may also outline procedures for implementation, execution and subsequent evaluation. The agreements may be voluntary, legal or administrative in form.

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### PUBLIC-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPSÂ

Community-Community  
Partnership between communitiesÂ Â Â  
Main aim:

Sharing knowledge and experiences, techniques or technologies  
to  
promote, strengthen and consolidate public  
or community management  
of  
water and sanitation

**Public-Community**  
Partnership between a public sector provider and community

**Public-Public**  
Partnership between public sector entities

**Public-Civil Society**  
Partnership between a public sector supplier and non-profit sectors, such as trade unions and NGOs

**Community-Civil Society**  
Partnership between a community and non-profit sectors or organizations with a social justice or solidarity mandate including unions and NGOs

The public-community partnerships discussed below were all carried out under the auspices of the The Platform for Public and Community Partnerships of the Americas (PAPC).

The PAPC helps build alternatives to privatization in the region. It was established as a network of civil society organizations, public utilities, community organizations (community water supply systems), unions and activists involved in the struggle for the defense of water as a human right and common good. The PAPC was created under the leadership and support of the RED VIDA - a network of water justice organizations throughout the Americas. It is an independent network and is governed by democratic principles, based on horizontal decision-making, equality and solidarity among all its members.

The Platform was established on April 29, 2009 with the signing of the Framework Agreement in Paso Severino, Uruguay, which recognized the following founding historical acts:

- The fight to reclaim public control of water Cochabamba (2000) and El Alto (2005) in Bolivia, Santa Fe (2007), Buenos Aires (2001) in Argentina, and the fight to stop privatization in Honduras, El Salvador, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Paraguay, Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica and the United States.
- Popular proposals and the progress referred to in the World Social Forums since Porto Alegre, RED VIDA conferences in Lima-Peru (2007), Cochabamba, Bolivia (2008), Buga, Colombia (2009) and Mexico, DF (2012).
- The constitutional recognition of water as a human right in Uruguay (2004), Venezuela (2006), Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009) and federal law 11,447 in 2007 that established the National Sanitation Policy in Brazil. The efforts in the Americas to include in their political constitutions access to water as a basic human right.Â
- The Hashimoto Action Plan and the intervention of unions and social organizations in the elaboration of United Nations Secretary-Generals' Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, which includes cooperative partnerships between non-profit water systems.

The Platform opposes privatization, commercialization and outsourcing and resolves to promote and consolidate the human right to water and provide tools to defend and strengthen public and community water management. We work with communities, cooperatives, organized villages as well as academia and local governments to prioritize health, social justice and hygiene needs over economic considerations in water management.

The main goal of the Platform is to initiate, support and facilitate the exchange of experiences and expertise through public-community agreements among different public utilities, unions, cooperatives, and community water systems. The Platform is a vehicle for the promotion a common agenda of multi-sectoral cooperation for the democratization and strengthening of public and community water management.

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### CASE STUDIES

#### Colombia

##### Public-Community Partnerships: Local public policies to strengthen community management of water

The partnerships in Colombia were developed to support resistance to the Colombian state's policy of privatization of public water services. The Colombian partnerships are agreements between community organizations that administer water supply systems and local authorities such as mayors and municipal councils. Municipal councils are elected bodies that exercise political control over local decision making, create municipal public policies, and are responsible for municipal agreements.

Under the principles of the PAPC, the Corporation Penca de SÃ¡bila promoted and facilitated the consolidation of three public-community agreements in the municipalities of Barbosa (2009), Thames (2012) and La Union (2012). These partnerships were initiated by representatives of community water supply systems belonging to networks or associations and working in collaboration with local authorities to develop an agreement to strengthen the institutional, technical, administrative and financial abilities of water service providers. The partnerships were aimed at meeting the basic needs of the population and effectively guaranteeing peoples' rights to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

The implementation of these partnerships has strengthened the role played by community water supply systems in the area and their participation in the technical public policy committees where budget decisions are made about allocations for improving the provision of water services.

#### Uruguay and Brazil

##### Public-Public Contract: Sharing knowledge to improve public water management

The Uruguay-Brazil partnership was signed in 2012 between the Uruguayan State Water Department (OSE), the sole provider of basic water and sanitation services in Uruguay, and the Municipal Department of Water and Sewerage (DMAE) of Porto Alegre, Brazil. This public-public partnership was signed in order to improve operational efficiency and technical systems and to guarantee water as a fundamental human right. This was accomplished through various means, including knowledge sharing, technical training, technological development and implementation as well as the identification of unmet needs.

Specifically, the partnership facilitated field visits enabling the exchange of information regarding metering, water distribution, potabilization techniques and technological development. Through these exchanges the partnership supported skill-building activities for workers, users and social organizations committed to improving the performance of

both companies.

Through this partnership both parties found ways to improve and strengthen their practices as providers of a vital public service. These improvements were not only technical and administrative in nature but also social. As part of the agreement, both service providers committed to better incorporating human rights principles into their operations and supporting each other to find solutions to the challenges in realizing the human rights to water and sanitation in their respective regions.

## Colombia

### An alliance between workers and the community to strengthen a community aqueduct

In 2012, in the department of the Valle del Cauca, Colombia, two unions—the public services utility union ACUAVALLE (SINTRACUAVALLE) and the Public Employees of the National Environmental System Union (SINTRAMBIENTE) signed a partnership with representatives of a community water supply system, La Sirena, located in the city of Santiago de Cali.

The exchange of knowledge and experience among workers and community organizations strengthened the community water system in a number of ways. On the technical side, the La Sirena community water system managed to expand its distribution network and identify new metering techniques that helped address community concerns about excessive billing due to water leaks. From an administrative perspective, accounting and billing procedures have improved. From an environmental perspective there has been improvement with the implementation of regular monitoring of the watershed and proposed plans for reforestation.<sup>1</sup>

As with other partnerships discussed in this paper, the Colombian alliance maintained a non-hierarchical approach by respecting the autonomy of each organization and by applying common principles such as the right to water and the promotion of community and public water management strategies against privatization.

## Uruguay, Colombia and Bolivia

### Community-supportive Agreement: A multi-sector and international partnership for improving the quality of life of a community

Colombia's Second International Meeting URCOLBO was held in 2014 in Medellin between Uruguay, Colombia and Bolivia in order to exchange experiences among public and community water operators. During this meeting an agreement was made to create an alliance to strengthen community water systems in San Andrés Township Girardota, Colombia. The partnership involved the Community Water Systems of San Andrés, the Municipal Association of Community water systems Girardota (GIRAGUAS), the Association of Community Water Supply Department of Antioquia (ADACA), the Corporation Penca Aloe, SINTRACUAVALLE, SINTRAMBIENTE and the community water services system, La Sirena.

In 2015, the partnership facilitated a technical diagnosis of the system and developed a wide-range improvement plan<sup>2</sup> while respecting the differing skills and knowledge of member organizations.

## Lessons learned and challenges

The partnerships illustrate the possibility of creating and implementing alternatives that strengthen public and community water management under the principles of solidarity and the human rights to water and sanitation. The relationships developed through these partnerships have great potential for helping to consolidate alliances that endure beyond the actual agreements as bonds of trust and mutual support are generated. These partnerships illustrate how fruitful the exchange of knowledge, technology and experience is as a method of empowering organizations.

The process of developing a partnership that adequately addresses the specific needs of each partner through non-hierarchical processes is often slow. In public-community agreements obstacles may arise when the political will of local authorities is unclear and causes delays in the implementation of the agreement. In the civic and community partnerships the chances of achieving major advances and improvements are, in some cases, hampered or reduced by the lack of resources.

Finally, the importance of seeking and formalizing partnerships among diverse organizations as an effective strategy to resist the ever-strengthening forces of privatization of water utilities in the Americas cannot be overemphasized. â–„

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## The Platform of Public-Community Partnerships

### The Network for Life

## Videos

The Public-Community Partnership in Vereda San AndrÃ©s - Corpensa Â

Video and Memory of International Meeting URCOLB Phase II, Columbia - Corpensa

International Meeting URCOLB Phase I, Uruguay - Youtube

Community-Community Partnership in Cochabamba, Bolivia - YoutubeÂ

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