



## WATER AND SANITATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA: COMMUNITY ADMINISTRATION IS THE KEY TO SUSTAINABILITY

Few Nicaraguans in rural areas are unaware of the water and sanitation committees known as CAPS (Comités de Agua Potable y Saneamiento). Hondurans speak of JAAPS (Juntas Administradoras de Agua Potable y Saneamiento), which are community water and sanitation boards. Be they committees or boards, in the past few decades the organisations in charge of supplying water to thousands of rural communities, towns and villages have multiplied in both countries. Without this citizens' movement, it would be impossible to meet one of the main Millennium Development Goals.

"Having enough water at home is very hard and we women do the lion's share of that work", says Auxiliadora Úbeda, a Nicaraguan who coordinates the CAPS in La Esperanza. Her community in the Jinotega municipality in the northern region of Nicaragua has considerable experience in managing a small drinking-water system. Some twenty years ago, the community built three rope-pump wells with the support of an NGO. Over the years, two wells fell into disuse for lack of maintenance and because the water table was so deep that it was too much work to draw water from it. Besides the technical problems, local people were not interested in doing anything about it. Auxiliadora Úbeda explains: "Over time, there were fewer and fewer CAPS meetings until in the end only one of the seven members who had been



**Auxiliadora Úbeda,**  
La Esperanza  
CAPS coordinator,  
Nicaragua



**The drinking-water system is built in teamwork by the local community**

elected was left. That was the treasurer, and he did what he could." Motivated by the mayor's office of Jinotega, the people of La Esperanza recently elected a new board of directors to revive the CAPS and to seek the authorities' approval for a new drinking-water project.

Many water committees and boards in Central America have had their share of ups and downs. These grass-roots organisations operate thousands of small water systems that supply drinking water to local neighbourhood. This model has won the approval of all sectors. The authorities and local population agree: without the voluntary participation of citizens, it would be impossible to guarantee the water supply and basic sanitation in many remote rural areas. Both in Honduras and Nicaragua, community administrators mainly focus on water services because sanitation is managed by families themselves. In the field of basic sanitation, the water committees and boards play more the role of outreach workers than of administrators of a public service.

"The local residents who form committees or boards are a good example of development based on voluntary and broad participation by local people", notes François Münger, head of the Global Programme Water Initiative of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's (SDC). In Central America, the SDC's AGUASAN programme contributes to the efforts of people and governments to close the gap of four million people who still lack access to drinking water and adequate sanitation. Halving the number of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015 is one of the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations.

## NICARAGUA

### THE DAILY STRUGGLE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

As far as Gilberto Aráuz, head of the Nicaraguan Institute of Aqueducts and Sewerage (INAA), is concerned, there is no doubt that the CAPS play a key role in the effective provision of water and sanitation services. He makes the following simple calculation: if each CAPS has at least three managers (directivos), then that means there are more than 20,000 people in Nicaragua working to provide safe drinking water in rural areas. "The government would never be able to afford to pay them", he concludes.

There are major challenges in maintaining water distribution systems, pumps and pipes in good working order. Aráuz says: "At the start of the projects, when people lack water, it's easier to motivate them to participate in the work and do what's needed, but soon many think that they have done their bit and that they



**Gilberto Aráuz,**  
Director of rural  
water systems at the  
Nicaraguan Institute  
of Aqueducts and  
Sewerage



**Oscar Funes, of the water committee El Jicarito-La Piedra checks the measuring system**

should now receive the service on a permanent basis. But that's not how it works: the challenge for the CAPS is to pay the bills on time, and to be accountable and transparent, otherwise an infrastructure that is in most cases designed to last for 20 years would collapse."

Aráuz, who works as an engineer for the public administration in Managua, explains: "Community administrators don't receive funds directly for their operations. Consequently, the big challenge for the CAPS is to achieve sustainability. Many are managing to do this, but it's a day-to-day struggle. Their success is based on

the fact that users are aware that drinking-water services have to be paid for in a fair and responsible way."

"Close and direct relations between the INAA and the CAPS are limited by a lack of resources", says Aráuz. "Sometimes we can make on-the-spot visits to the CAPS, but that's something we do with the support of voluntary workers. Another form of direct contact with the CAPS is through municipal training courses. We invited a CAPS group to attend a training course on the management, operation and maintenance of drinking-water systems at the municipal headquarters."



**The pride of access to drinking water: The water committee of the village "Walter Calderon" visits the newly installed filter system**

Although the government does not help cover the CAPS' operating expenses, mechanisms to fund new investments do exist. Aráuz explains: "In rural areas, the Emergency Social Investment Fund (Fondo de Inversión Social de Emergencia, FISE) receives money directly from the government and channels international cooperation funds. The project developed by FISE involves municipalities and communities, each of which contributes a percentage of the total funds invested. Rural communities mainly contribute unskilled labour."

## HONDURAS

### WOMEN AND MEN TOGETHER IN PEÑA BLANCA

In Peña Blanca, an indigenous Lenca community in the Department of Intibucá, the Community Action Plan was a starting point to develop a drinking-water project and install latrines. The JAAPS took charge of the project with the support of the mayor of the municipality of San Isidro. The project was implemented thanks to a financial contribution made by the SDC via AGUASAN. The mayor's office contributed 6% of the total investment and the SDC 58%. The people of Peña Blanca, for their part, contributed their unskilled labour and local materials, accounting for 36% of the total investment.

Francisco Martínez, mayor of the municipality of San Isidro, highlights the health benefits the project has brought to the community: "Before, when local people used to drink water from streams or ponds, or untreated rainwater, cases of diarrhoea were constantly being recorded. Today, such cases are very rare owing to the fact people drink clean water and no longer defecate in the open because they have latrines."

Furthermore, says Mayor Martínez, "The experience of Peña Blanca has helped our municipality initiate two other drinking-water and sanitation projects in communities that had never had these services. The mayor's office supports meetings between communities so that water boards that have already gone through the whole process of organising and developing projects can relate their experience and motivate and enable other communities to do the same. When leaders of other communities learn about the success of these projects and how it was achieved, they become interested in visiting communities that already have water and sanitation services. This helps them push forward their own organisational process."



**Francisco Martínez,**  
mayor of San Isidro,  
Honduras



**The committee of El Crique de Oro (Honduras) meets to discuss administrative challenges and achievements**

And what role do the water boards play? Mayor Martínez explains: "So far, the JAAPs have shown that they comply with their own regulations and manage and operate the services efficiently. In that sense, they provide key support for the development of the municipality. If the JAAPs lost their capacity to ensure the sustainability of the systems and services, the mayor's office would face a major challenge, because on top of funding it would have to manage the whole thing. It would be necessary to create an entire structure capable of replacing the JAAPs. These boards also have considerable power to bring the community together and they take care of the work required for other projects in conjunction with the mayor's office. The same drinking-water and sanitation board has recently served as a channel for the community to join an electrification project."

The active participation of women on the board was a new development for the community of Peña Blanca. María Suyapa Rodríguez accepted, reluctantly at first,



**María Suyapa, secretary of Peñas Blancas committee with her husband Erasmo Meza, Honduras**

a position of responsibility: "Before, we women did not participate because we were too shy. Because many of us didn't have much schooling, we figured we weren't capable. But in the water and sanitation workshops we learned that women can and must participate. That's when I agreed to join the JAAPS board of directors. During my tenure, three of us on the board of directors were women: I was the secretary, a friend of mine was treasurer and another one was the second member of the board. After two years on the board, I feel like a different person: I think I can take on other positions of responsibility, either on the water board or in another community project."

Erasmo Meza, María Suyapa's partner, was one of the main people who encouraged her to join the board: "During a training course, we had been taught that women and men had the same rights and that women were also capable of holding positions of responsibility. That's why when the water project was launched, I encouraged her to attend the meetings and accept the post. Here, our main job as men is to work the fields, to do agricultural work. Women are in charge of water at home. That's why I think it's also important for them to take part in the project and in the JAAPS. Men and women should participate equally."



**Good-quality drinking water reduces disease and improves the quality of life of children and adults**

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### **UNITY IS STRENGTH: THE NICARAGUAN CAPS NETWORK IS BORN**

The drinking-water and sanitation committees are becoming increasingly important in Nicaragua. Over the years, members of various CAPS felt the need to reach out to each other. They had common visions, problems and struggles. Links were gradually forged between CAPS at various levels: local, municipal and departmental. The Nicaraguan CAPS network was formally established in 2011. Today it is an established forum for dialogue among community managers of water and sanitation systems. At the national level, the highest authority is the General Assembly, which meets twice a year. Three members from each department are elected by ballot from the community level right up to the departmental level.

The managers explain that the network was originally started in 2003, when the water sources of two communities in the municipality of San Dionisio were under serious threat. The deforestation of more than four hectares of mountain forests threatened to cut off the supply of water to some 16,000 people. "As community leaders, we organised a protest march against the timber buyers. About 600 of us joined the march. We took our appeal to various government offices: the National Police, the Ministry of the Environment and the National Forestry Institute. But all government authorities sided with the owner of the estate that was cutting down the forest."

The network operates at the municipal, departmental and national levels. Contact with representatives of other CAPS helps many members of the committees resolve basic problems and provides them with a platform to exchange experiences and enrich their daily work:

- **Best practices:** When the managers of a committee complain about the irresponsible consumption of water, which drives up costs and puts the water source at risk, they can be sure that other CAPS are grappling with the same problems: "In the network meetings we hear proposals and discuss our experiences, for example micro-metering, which forces people to use water responsibly. When we identify a good practice, we rely on the network to spread the word and put it into practice."
- **Information and support:** The Network assists newly established CAPS in complying with legal formalities and communicates important information to the communities, e.g. about the municipal budget for water and sanitation. According to members of the network, "This information enables communities to participate more actively in open municipal council meetings, where they can apply for a share of funds for new projects or to improve existing systems".
- **Training:** State institutions in charge of the water sector rely on the network to send invitations to the CAPS to attend workshops, seminars and technical training courses.
- **Coordination:** The network maintains links with state institutions in the agricultural and forestry sectors as well as with the national police force. Nevertheless, there is no economic relationship between the state and the network: "They make no financial contributions to us", notes a member of the board of directors of the Nicaraguan CAPS network.

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### **THREE VOICES – ONE CAUSE:**

*"We estimate that in Nicaragua there are some 5,500 CAPS supplying more than a million people. That's about 70% of the rural population. They are accomplishing a task that the government would not be able to fulfil on its own."*

Gilberto Aráuz of the Nicaraguan Institute of Aqueducts and Sewerage (INAA)

*"We are one of the few if not the only alternative supplier of water to rural areas which the state has historically been unable to cover."*

A member of the board of directors of the Nicaraguan CAPS Network

*"History has shown that the success of this community management model is largely based on the autonomy enjoyed by the JAAPS. These boards are not managed by a third party but act according to the needs of their community."*

Luis Moncada Gross, former director of the Honduras Regulatory Authority for Drinking Water and Sanitation (ERSAPS)

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