

Communitarian water management in Bolivia

The case of Cochabamba's *Comités de Agua*

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Abstract

In order to understand the processes, impact and viable alternatives to water privatization, we should study local examples, such as the model of water governance given by the *Comités de Agua* of Cochabamba. *Comités de Agua* is the name attributed to groups providing water and sanitation services in which every service user is also a member and co-owner of the organization. The paper analyzes the structure of this organization taking into consideration the Bolivian policy on water and the peculiar social and political context of peri-urban areas.

The global context

As seen in the recently concluded 6th World Water Forum¹, the privatization of water, a resource which is seen by many as natural capital, is a global issue which has serious impact at local level. While privatization of water is endorsed by a transnational policy network composed by transnational water companies and IFI (International Financial Institutions) the opposition has taken place mainly on a local level. A global movement to “re-appropriate water”² is gaining relevance but it is of fundamental importance to support it through concrete and viable alternatives. In order to understand the processes, impact and viable alternatives to water privatization, we need to study local examples, such as the model of water governance that emerged from the famous “water war”³ in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Cochabamba is an important example of a different water governance. Its communitarian water committees show how a truly democratic water management can be used to address water-services problems in disadvantaged urban areas as well as provide a model that integrates traditional customs with the necessities of an official water provider.

The current water crisis has been described as a “crisis of water governance” (GWP 2002:1) rooted in poverty, power and inequality (WGF 2009:1). Nevertheless water governance is a vague concept that invites a variety of sometimes contradictory policy recommendations. The principal difficulty being that it is often presented as a depoliticized technical instrument (Castro 2007b:101) transferring so the focus from

* I spent two months in Cochabamba researching the working of the *comités de agua*, communitarian associations that try to obtain and manage water for their neighbourhoods in the most disadvantaged part of the municipality (*Zona Sur*), and the working of ASICA Sur, the representative of most Cochabamba's *comités de agua*.

¹ 6th WWF Ministerial Declaration, articles 22, 26, 18.

² <http://www.fame2012.org/en/>, <http://www.fame2012.org/en/>, <http://www.fame2012.org/en/>, consulted 14/03/2012.

³ Protests against the privatization of Cochabamba's water system (2000).

rights and entitlements to efficiency and sustainability (Li 2001:1 in Goldman 2007:1).⁴ This outlook is often associated with privatization because many, including the World Bank (World Bank 1996:49), believe private companies have more incentive to act efficiently than state-owned enterprises. A different approach to water governance (water democracy) concentrate instead on distributive fairness, involvement of all actors in policy making and acknowledgement of social, cultural and traditional rights (Shiva 2002:24).

Crucial point of different approaches is the view of water as communal good or commodity. When this resource is privatized a discursive change occurs: from service to business and from citizens to consumers (Crespo, Spronk, 2007:28). This has consequences on the exercise of democracy: even if the involvement of all actors is mainstream in water discourse (Rogers, Hall 2003:17), evidence show that “Private Sector Participation” policies alienated citizenry from participation in the democracy policy process (Castro 2007a:766).

Since the early nineties international financial institutions started to include privatization of state-owned water services as a condition for the concession of loans (Crespo, Sprong 2007:9). This policy was accompanied by a transnational policy network that had the ambition of generating a global policy agenda on water that endorsed commodification as a way to supply water to the poor (Goldman 2007:1).

The theory that the market can extend the provision of drinking water to areas where the public sector is not active does not have, however, solid theoretical or factual roots, and the expected outcome has not materialized (Castro 2007a:757).

Opposition to privatization is currently wide and varied. While campaigns are mostly local, international organizations are active at a global level especially at events as the World Water Forum (Hall, Lobina, Motte 2005:286) holding, since 2002, an Alternative Forum with the aim of “solidifying the movement to re-appropriate water”.⁵

Bolivian Policy on water

The current of thought named “green radicalism” affirms the necessity to refute models of development based on economical growth to solve the environmental crisis. On an international level, Bolivia’s president Evo Morales seemed to embrace this vision, indicating capitalism as the reason for climate change (Vidal 2009).

Attention is also given to water governance, owing to the symbolical importance this issue has acquired since the “water war”. A positive result in the international arena was obtained on July 28, 2010 when the UN General Assembly Resolution, tabled by the Bolivian representative, recognizing Water and Sanitation as a right, was passed.

⁴ Li, Tania. (2002). *Government through community in the age of neoliberalism*, UC-Santa Cruz, CA.

⁵ <http://www.fame2012.org/en/http://www.fame2012.org/en/>, <http://www.fame2012.org/en/>, consulted 14/03/2012.

A similar sensibility is present in the New Bolivian Constitution⁶ which contains numerous references to protection of the environment and recognizes the human right to water. In addition to this, the fifth chapter of the constitution is completely dedicated to water: it underlines its social and cultural role, denying a simply economical approach. This notwithstanding, there are some ambiguous points, mostly concerning the inclusion of private company participation in the possible methods of water management. With regards to internal policy, a pressing problem is to find an equilibrium between the environmental sensibility present in the Bolivian Constitution and the desire of the government to develop oil and mining industries which have lead to difficult relations between local communities, mining companies and the government.

Since the constitution officially recognized indigenous communities, communitarian organisations and their traditional rules and practices, these entities should be able to defend their territories. This is particularly the case with regards to water supply since additional protection is given by the new Law on Water and Sanitation services (law 2066).⁷ However, as Crespo underlines,⁸ rural communities face significant difficulties when they clash with the interests of mining companies.

We should now consider the political force of communitarian organisation, and of the social movements that they form, to understand if equilibrium can be maintained between private company interests, governmental policies on economic growth and environment protection and communitarian organisations.

Communitarian organisations in peri-urban areas

In the early eighties, the structural reform of the Bolivian economy caused a massive immigration of unemployed miners and rural families, nearly all of indigenous origins, to the rapidly growing peri-urban fringes of the main cities where they have been creating an array of organisations, mainly with the aim of solving practical and organisational problems exacerbated by the absence of the state in the new settlements, especially in the field of basic services. In time, these “largely indigenous proletarian urban centres” (Webber 2010:15), gave birth to some of the most important social movements in recent years which assumed a leading role in popular upheavals (as during the “water war” in 2000)⁹ and are now protagonists of the so-called *proceso de cambio*.¹⁰ We should underline, as affirmed by Webber, that these indigenous social movements

⁶ Approved by referendum in 25 January 2009.

⁷ Ley de Servicios de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado Sanitario; Law on Potable Water and Sanitation Services. www.redesma.org/docs_portal/leyes/ley_2066_agua_potable.pdf

⁸ Carlos Crespo, Cochabamba, November 2009, personal interview. Crespo is director of the research centre CESU, Universidad Mayor de San Simon.

⁹ Series of protest against the management of Cochabamba’s water system by Agua del Tunari (2000).

¹⁰ An expression that unifies the social, political and economical changes that Evo Morales’ government aspires to bring about.

“have been a response in large part to the social costs resulting from neoliberal economic restructuring. (...) Rather than being new movements, the contemporary left-indigenous struggles in Bolivia are deeply linked to longstanding insurrectionary traditions of indigenous and working class resistance.”¹¹

This affirmation can be best understood if we look at the enormous influence that the COB¹² had in Bolivia until the economical restructuring of the 1980s. The miners constituted the political core of the union so, when state-owned mines were closed or sold, the COB lost most of its importance. The unemployed miners brought their own trade union expertise to the new settlements where they intermingled with the communitarian practices of rural families creating new models of organisations based on “communitarian management” and on the traditional Andean direct democracy model that assigns the highest authority to the assembly. While not all inhabitants get involved in this form of collective management (Cielo 2009:12), owing to a series of issues including distrust and ‘modernization’ of social relationships (Cielo 2009:19), participation is still considered a duty as well as a right. In many cases, in fact, attendance at the assembly is mandatory and absence is sanctioned through fines or the allocation of work shifts.

The *Zona Sur* of Cochamba is the city’s rapidly growing peri-urban fringe and is mainly inhabited by indigenous Andean peoples (both Quechua and Aimara) and by immigrants from mining communities where unemployment is prevalent. The provision of basic services has not met the city’s rate of expansion. Owing to an inequitable distribution of public resources, the majority of water and sewage services in the *Zona Sur* are not provided for by Cochabamba’s municipal water and sanitation company (SEMAPA) and its inhabitants have poor access to hospitals and schools.

Because of its social diversity and the differing history of each of its districts, or *barrios*, communitarian organizations have tended to develop on a very local level within the *Zona Sur*. Most were founded without any support from the state. Naturally migrants arriving in Cochabamba bring their traditions and social organization with them. Nevertheless, although a significant part of the population of the *Zona Sur* is of rural origin, the organizational models that they employ are not identical to those found in indigenous rural communities. As Pablo Regalsky argues:

“There are people who say that the *comunarios*¹³ who come to the city “bring their community with them”. But culture isn’t a social space, it originates from the environment, it cannot exist solely in someone’s head. I believe that when someone leaves his community, he does it as an individual, not as a member of a family. When

¹¹ Webber 2010, p.15.

¹² Central Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Trade Union).

¹³ Member of an indigenous community.

they go out through the community's door they leave its rules and traditions to enter another space, the urban space, that has its own rules."¹⁴

However a strong similitude with traditional communitarian organization can be found in the importance of collective work, fundamental to the functioning of the *barrios*. The roads and the water services are usually built through collectively agreed work shifts. Funding, of course, is also important, for example to purchase equipment or hire skilled labour, but it is not central:

"Everything is based on communal work. People have made a large contribution of \$160 but that was just to buy the materials, to pay the plumber... but everything else was done by *vecinos* [neighbors], we all worked together, all work was communal. And we didn't receive any help from the government or the prefecture."¹⁵

The *Comités the Agua* are also communitarian organizations, at times they are part of pre-existing ones and others are constructed expressly, but they all maintain the fundamental characteristics of communitarian organizations.

Comités de Agua

Comités de agua (comités) is the name attributed to groups providing water and sanitation services in which every service user is also a member and co-owner of the organisation. It falls to the members, in fact, to provide the money and labour necessary to construct the water system. This means that a member has not only the right of access to water but also the right, and duty, to participate in decision making and administration of the *comité* (Bustamante, Butterworth and Fayssa 2007:91).

The *comités* had an important role during Cochabamba's "water war". This experience reinforced their unity and gave them political experience and influence. One of the most notable changes was the foundation of ASICA Sur (2004) which now represents around 120 *comités*.¹⁶ After the "water war" there was also a change in water legislation and the law 2066 recognised the *comités* as potential EPSA¹⁷. Now that they are officially recognized they do not risk to be expropriated or disbanded but there is a risk that the independence of these associations might be jeopardized and that they may become corrupt.¹⁸

The nature of the relationship that needs to be forged between state-owned water and sanitation services and communitarian associations is also unclear, especially in large cities like Cochabamba and La Paz. The proposal to create a new

¹⁴ Pablo Regalsky, Anthropologist, director of CENDA: *Centro de comunicaciòn e Desarrollo Andino*. Personal interview, Cochabamba, November 2009.

¹⁵ President of *Comités de Agua* n. 5. Personal Interview, October 2009.

¹⁶ Carlos Roplesagua, Employee of ASICA Sur. Personal interview, Cochabamba, November 2009.

¹⁷ Official provider of Water and Sanitation Services.

¹⁸ Carlos Crespo, *Ibid*.

water provider from a union of communitarian associations could deepen existing disparities. In Cochabamba, the relationship between the *comités* and SEMAPA¹⁹ is extremely tense. As yet, SEMAPA has been unable to expand its water and sanitation services to the *Zona Sur* and it is accused of inefficiency, lack of transparency and nepotism.

The *comités de agua* are the main water providers for 22.4% of the *Zona Sur*. As the water is not always suitable for human consumption residents purchase additional water from vendors, who are the main water providers for 62.2% of the population.²⁰ However, the water sold by these vendors is often of a low quality and comes at a high price.

Cochabamba's first *Comités de Agua* were founded in the eighties as a consequence of waves of immigration from rural and mining areas. The farmers and miners from the Altiplano, the Andean Plateau, brought with them their unique experiences of water management. In fact, of all the leaders of the various *comités* that I interviewed, only one was born in Cochabamba and his parents were not native to the city. Also, concerning water management in the community of origin, all leaders interviewed have confirmed the existence of either a *Comités de agua* or a *regantes* association.²¹ Two leaders stressed the difficulty in reconciling the various rules to which the different members were accustomed.

The *Comités de Agua* respond to the demand for drinking water with democratic and participative organizational models which are radically different to the ones used in private and even public water companies. Their response to water problems are not only technical but also social and cultural. Crucial is the understanding that in this type of system the community does not delegate responsibility to someone else, whether to the state or a private company.

Organization model

On the organizational level the *comités de agua* are generally composed by a directorate, headed by a president, and by a general assembly formed by the service users. Some of them also have secretarial and technical staff. All the elected positions are unpaid (Franz 2009:19). The member's assembly is the most important body in the comité and covers various functions. When a *comité de agua* is established it is the assembly that draws up the statute. In addition, the assembly elects the president and the members of the directorate, either by secret ballots or a public show of hands. Not all *comités* are recognized as legal entities and some do not have a written statute.

But it is universal that in the *comités* it is the assembly that, besides being the principal decision making body, has also the responsibility to establish the basic rules regulating the *comités* works. Having said this, it should not be assumed that the

¹⁹ Servicio Municipal de Agua y Alcantarillado. Cochabamba Municipal Water and Sanitation Company.

²⁰ Only taking into consideration the 7, 8, 9 e 14 district. INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística), 2004.

²¹ Organization in rural communities that manage water, mainly for the irrigation of fields.

directorate acts as a mere enforcer. In fact its role differs depending on its members at a given time. Even if the assembly always takes the most important decisions, the power balance between the directorate and the members may vary. It is the assembly that negotiates any conflicts:

“If there are conflicts it’s always the general assembly that has to solve them, there is a statute and we have to follow it, and it is stated that the assembly holds the ultimate authority [in the *comité*]. We have to call a meeting if there is a problem between the members or within the directorate – of course only if it is a big problem, if it is not so important the Directorate can’t solve it.”²²

The assembly has also the authority over implementing sanctions and exercises social control on the members of the Directive. Certainly within the *comités* great importance is given to right of the members to control the actions of their leaders. Most of the leaders interviewed underlined the fact that being honest and acting transparently are virtues that are fundamental to the *comité*, as is the ability to keep accounts in order and justify the way funds are allocated. As the president of the Alto Pagador *comité de agua* explained in an interview:

“Our core value is honesty and transparency, which is where the previous board members went wrong. To regain the confidence of the people, we must demonstrate what we are doing, in what we are investing, get the accounts in order and update the members so that everyone can come and see what we are doing. You have to show people how you’re using the money.”²³

To understand the sanctions imposed on leaders and members of the *comités* we first have to clarify the concept of social participation in the context of Bolivian communal organizations. Participation to the general assembly, for example, is mandatory as is the participation in any initiative the *comité* has decided to support – be it, for example, communal work, protest or *bloqueo*. Members of *comités* have thus the duty to contribute water payments and collective work as well as to participate in political and administrative activities.

All the directorate’s members interviewed confirmed the existence of fines for not attending an assembly. One president specified that the fines for members of the directorate are twice as much as those for ordinary members – whether paid in cash or in communal work. Concerning the non payment of water bills every *comité* has its own rules. The deterrent can vary from fines to temporary or even permanent termination of water services. In some *comités*, a precise rule does not seem to exist. Sometimes the excessive consumption of water is sanctioned against.

²² President of Comités de Agua n.5. Personal Interview, October 2009.

²³ President of Comités de Agua n.5. Personal Interview, October 2009.

Communal property

Once the *comité* has been established it falls to the members to provide both the money and the labor necessary to construct the water system. Members entering the *comités* at a later date typically pay a fee. Direct participation and monetary contributions are the keys to the understanding of the relationship between the members and the *comité*. They are not simply users of the water system but co-owners:

“It is a type of property that is, in a sense, private (because it does not depend on the state but directly on the citizens), but at the same time it is public (it is not owned by an individual but by the community). That’s why it’s called collective or communal property. The main reason for the existence of this type of ownership is not economic, but it is born to meet a social need: the administration of a public good, like water, that should never be considered a private good or traded as such.”²⁴

On the other hand it is necessary to clarify that the water system is not owned by all the inhabitants of a neighbourhood but only by the members of the *comités*. In most cases the water system does not reach all the inhabitants and, in some cases, not even all the members of the *comités* receive water. In some *barrios*, *comités de sin agua* were established.²⁵ However some *comités* do provide water for a whole *barrios*, members and non-members alike.

ASICA Sur

ASICA Sur (*Asociación de Sistemas Comunitarios de la Zona Sur*) was officially established in 2004. The process that led to its creation, however, began in 2003 with the founding of the PROVIDA association by a group of social organizations, including six *comités de agua*, with the aim of coordinating their work in the south-east of Cochabamba, or Area C.25.

On August 22, 2004, a general assembly of *comités de agua* from the *Zona Sur* founded ASICA Sur. At that time it coordinated around 40 associations.

Its internal organization is similar to the *comités*. As in the *comités* ASICA Sur’s main authority is an assembly formed by the presidents of the local water networks.

The executive body consists of five members elected by the Assembly every two years and they are not paid. ASICA Sur also has a technical team, consisting of paid staff. ASICA Sur has the responsibility to:

²⁴ Yaku al Sur, Boletín 2, Agosto 2003 Cochabamba.

²⁵ Committee of those without water.

“Strengthening community networks, being the spokesman of the community networks, managing projects, but also fighting for access to quality water at a fair price in the Zona Sur.”²⁶

Initially, the purpose of ASICA Sur was to act as interlocutor for the authorities to ensure water supply to the *Zona Sur* and to participate in the reform of SEMAPA. But the inefficiency with which SEMAPA’s planned expansion of the water network was carried out prompted ASICA Sur to return its focus to the *comités* and begin its own expansion project (Franz 2009: 18).

Co-management

As yet there is no defined model for communal and state water associations which can be used as a guide in co-managing a water network. The original co-management project envisioned the division of tasks between the *comités*, ASICA Sur and SEMAPA. In it SEMAPA would provide treated water “in bulk” as well as the experience and resources needed in maintenance and engineering works. The *comités*, on the other hand, would use the water supply infrastructures already in place in the *barrios* and manage the network through their democratic decision-making mechanisms. ASICA Sur was to represent the *comités* before the authorities and institutions.

According to the results of a workshop on co-management held during the third *Feria de Agua* in Cochabamba in 2010,

“There are many legal difficulties in co-managing water because of laws and regulations made by institutions who do not know or respect local practices. Another risk is that the difficulties in coordinating various agencies will be a detriment to water management.”²⁷

The poor reputation of SEMAPA should also be taken into consideration. Most *comités* board members that I interviewed have no relations with the public water company and when they have, they generally expressed them negatively. SEMAPA is accused of being unreliable and to break its promises. This opinion is justified by the poor results of various projects aiming to expand the SEMAPA water and sanitation network to the *Zona Sur*. In addition, some leaders stressed the profound difference between SEMAPA and the *comités*, emphasizing corruption and inefficiency in resource management, a lack of transparency and the fact that the leaders of SEMAPA are paid:

²⁶ Carlos Roplesagua, Equipe ASICA Sur. The interview and subsequent translation is mine, Cochabamba, November 2009.

²⁷ Results document from work shop on co-management, III Feria de Agua, Cochabamba 2010.

“This is what SEMAPA should learn from us, we are on the directorate and we work for free, for the good of the people... Outside the barrios we are always immersed in something foreign, but here we work as a community. In the city center SEMAPA laid the pipes and the sewer, and after paying taxes the citizens do not participate at all.”²⁸

Moreover, as envisaged in the co-management model, some *comité* leaders I interviewed have made it clear that they do not intend to yield water management to an external authority. This conviction is not only due to the poor reputation of SEMAPA but also, as has already been stressed, to the fact that the members of the *comités* are co-owners of a water network and that they have sacrificed time and money to build it. As the president of one of the *comités* told me:

“If we passed on the administration to SEMAPA it would be a betrayal of the people’s trust because it doesn’t have a good administration. The *comités de agua* have demonstrated that we can administrate [the network] well. Unlike SEMAPA, we have a good management and we work for free – we don’t earn anything. If SEMAPA took over the administration we would lose all that we have invested. But I do not think that it will happen.”²⁹

In recent years the idea of creating a new public-communitarian water organization serving only the *Zona Sur*, and thus disregarding the co-management model, is gaining momentum within ASICA Sur.³⁰ Given that the *Zona Sur* is part of SEMAPA’S concession area, however, it is unclear how this organization would work.

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²⁸ President of Comités de Agua n.5. Personal Interview, October 2009.

²⁹ President of Comités de Agua n.5. Personal Interview, October 2009.

³⁰ Stefano Archidiacono, Project Coordinator for the NGO Ce.V.I. whose main local partner is ASICA Sur. Personal communication, June 2010.

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