

81. Participatory water governance in Mercosur countries

by
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Water is crucial to existence, and is getting scarcer. Participatory governance and involving citizens and social movements in the various stages of managing access to water in Mercosur countries increases access to water and is an important means of democratising natural resource policy-making.

Introduction

According to the UNESCO *World Water Development Report* in 2012, a combination of rising world temperatures, the growing demand for food as a consequence of demographic change, and the needs imposed by economic growth and market expansion, point to a potential threat of water scarcity in the near future.

Water allocation and management, or water governance, is an important debate, crucial for policy-making across states and civil society. In the 1980s and 1990s, large parts of Latin America chose to privatise their water supply services. These policies have changed more recently to broaden the public nature of water supply services and to increase community involvement in their management.

Privatisation and nationalisation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The experience of Brazil during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration (1994-2002) is an interesting example. The 1995 *Lei de Concessão dos Serviços Públicos* on the concession of public services included legislation to permit the privatisation of water resources. But two years later, in the proclamation of the National Policy for Water Resources (Law 9433/1997), water was recognised as a public good.

The Mercosur countries – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Uruguay – witnessed the development of mechanisms valuing civic engagement in policy-making in the late 1990s. Many researchers suggest that participatory policies redirect public spending towards the poorer sectors of the population, generate public transparency and accountability, and in general, stimulate higher levels of social participation. But others point to the difficulties involved in developing effective participatory processes. Some also criticise the state and traditional populist leaders' frequent control of such processes (Cortez and Gugliano, 2010).

Experiences of participatory water management

In the Mercosur region, different approaches have been adopted to strengthen community engagement in water management. Some are characterised by more representative mechanisms to encourage the involvement of organisations believed to represent water management interests (such as the state, consumers and the private sector), while the people's increased direct involvement characterises others.

The Brazilian experience is a good example of the development of a channel for institutional representation. The country has had the National Water Resources Integrated Management System in place since 1997. It consists of a national council for water resources, 23 state councils and 120 water basin committees. The committees are made up of public officials, water basin-related civil society organisations, and consumers. The committees are primarily responsible for debating water-related issues at local and regional level, ratifying water basin management plans and monitoring their implementation (Jacobi, 2006).

Other Mercosur countries have also developed water management mechanisms to open up the possibility of direct civic involvement. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, a law¹ on water supply and sanitation created water boards, *mesas de concertación*. These include water users, who discuss and assess water policy projects, investments and implementation at the national, local and regional levels. Building on existing civic public assemblies, it is estimated that there are nearly 7 500 such boards across the country (Lacabana and Cariola, 2007).

In Paraguay, civic involvement in water management occurs via water management boards.² These are also based on public assemblies, and their main duty is to manage the many aspects of water supply and public sanitation in small communities, those with fewer than 10 000 inhabitants. Other tasks they undertake include tackling sanitation-related issues, the planning and delivery of services, and the representation of water users in other public or private bodies. Legally registered as companies, it is estimated that some 2 000 *juntas* function across Paraguay (Moreno, 2008).

Even though a considerable part of its water supply services are in private hands, in Argentina too there are various experiences in water management, especially through the *cooperativas de agua* (water co-operatives). The co-operatives, which supply drinking water primarily to small localities, can be considered an alternative to the privatisation or statist models, in that water supply is carried out by the membership of a private association created for the purpose of managing water (Muñoz, 2005).

Civic involvement in the Mercosur region has also contributed to strategic management: the constitutional referendum on public ownership of water-related services held in Uruguay in October 2004 and approved by 62.75% of voters is a good example (Moshman, 2005).

Limits and prospects

Despite the positive results of these approaches, they are still heavily criticised. In Brazil, some point out that gathering social organisations onto a committee does not necessarily make the experience participatory. They also criticise the ineffectiveness of committee discussions. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, criticism is similar to that levelled at participatory policies in the Plurinational State of Bolivia – that populist government policies are appropriating citizen involvement. In Paraguay, the difficulty is

that various *juntas* have had to solve technical problems, because of a lack of infrastructure or of funds, thus jeopardising implementation. In Uruguay, the government's slowness to implement the results of the referendum has also led to criticism. In Argentina, the emphasis is on the risk that some co-operatives will adopt strategies similar to those of private companies (Arenas, 2005; Moreno, 2008; Moshman, 2005; Abbers and Keck, 2009).

While these may be valid criticisms, the key issue is to determine whether they obstruct the development of participatory models as alternatives to public policy-making and management, and specifically to water policies. It is worth stressing that since there are many participatory experiments in place in the region, some will succeed while others will inevitably fail. Uncertainty should not invalidate the perception that community engagement in policy-making can improve the results of public policies (Narayan, 1995; Kliksberg, 2001).

In the Mercosur area, change is perceptible after nearly two decades of participatory policies in water management. Paraguay and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela have increased access to piped drinking water, to a coverage of 69.3% (a 27% increase) and 84% (a 22% increase) respectively. In Brazil, 90% of the population has access to piped drinking water (an 8% increase). In Argentina the figure is 78% (a 10% increase), while in Uruguay coverage is nearly universal (98%).

This does not mean that all the difficult hurdles have been overcome. There is still huge inequality in water access and distribution between urban and rural areas; poor social sectors are often excluded, and large urban centres are favoured over small villages (UNDP, 2006). Similarly, progress still has to be made in broadening the region's laws on water management. New laws should unite and co-ordinate the various participatory instruments that each country has set in place. Furthermore, they should create mechanisms for citizens to be involved in the management of their common environmental legacy, such as the Guarani Aquifer System – an important underground water reservoir stretching across the entire Mercosur area, except for the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Conclusions

For Albert Hirschman (1984), one of the interesting points about community engagement in policy implementation is that besides the concrete outcomes, the process itself yields important intangible results. For example, the feeling of citizenship and sense of belonging, for so long numbed by conditions of extreme exclusion, can return.

Of the various strategies available to manage water resources, policies that involve citizens in public management are an opportunity to expand government management capacity and harness community knowledge and experience, using them to solve social issues and increase the effectiveness of public policy. In the Mercosur area, the experiments that have been conducted are proving effective in engaging local communities and citizens in setting the water agenda and managing it. They work by building on the interests of the users themselves, especially those with basic public policy needs.

Notes

1. *Ley orgánica para la prestación de los servicios de agua potable y saneamiento* (2001).
2. *Juntas de Saneamiento Ambiental* or Environmental Sanitation Boards, Law 369/72.

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