

Case Study: Development of Community Participation in the microbasin La Poza, El Salvador, Central America (#343)

1. Summary

The experience takes place in the municipalities of Usulután and Ozatlán in the western department of Usulután, in El Salvador, Central America. This experience rises and develops with the support of the AGUA project implemented by the foundation of municipalities of El Salvador (FUNDAMUNI). A relevant aspect is that the citizen participation process began as a bet on development and ended as a bet on the management of water resources at the micro river basin. In this process, the social capital was consolidated and certain institutional status was accomplished, which strengthened this process. Nowadays, it is an example easy to follow in other territories. The experience is very positive and may contribute to the implementation of water resources policies, promoted by the central and local government, with a clear participation-centered approach.

Importance of the case for IWRM

The community of the microbasin La Poza has begun a process for implementing Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) principles. Its main achievement is the advancement on the implementation of financial tools, based upon a high level of citizen participation, as well as the implementation of projects for the soil preservation, setting-up of hedgerows, creeks, reforestation, and community awareness on microbasin preservation efforts.

The community of the microbasin La Poza has acknowledged that water management calls for a comprehensive approach that articulates economical, social, environmental, cultural, social, institutional and political aspects. Therefore, they have worked on the formulation and participatory implementation of La Poza microbasin management plan, as well as on community awareness processes and financial and resource-managing mechanisms for investing in this microbasin, such as payment for environmental services. They have also successfully integrated into other decision-making organisms focused on the improvement of local development. These efforts have succeeded in introducing the Integrated Water Resource Management in local development plans. They have also achieved the support of a technical consultancy from the Ministry of the Environment, aimed to local soil, flora and fauna preservation.

The main factor highlighted by this process is the high level of citizen participation, especially women. The main community leader, and president of La Poza Microbasin Committee is, indeed, a woman, and she has achieved a high level of development for the organization. The initiative has promoted the dialogue and the coordination of different local and national sectors, which facilitates a proper community integrated water resources management and contributes to the democratization of its management.

This case shows how community participation can boost the integrated water resources management. Nevertheless, this process requires that politicians, especially those within the central government can replicate this experience at national and regional (Central American) level, in the near future.

Tools used

Some basic instruments that have been used as tools are C1.2 Water resources assessment; B1.9 Civil society institutions and community based organizations; C7.4 Subsidies and incentives and C2.2 River basin plans.

Key Words

Integrated water resources management, river basin, water, citizen's participation and environmental services.

2. Problems

La Poza is located between the upper and middle sub basin and it's found the municipalities of Ozatlán at the Southeast and Usulután at the Northwest. It comprises the counties of Las Trancas, Palmital and La Poza, in

the municipality of Ozatlan and Ojo de Agua, la Peña and El Talpetate in the municipality of Usulután.

The microbasin has a length of 10.1 kilometers, an area of 10.4 km² and a perimeter of 24.5 km. The microbasin is elongated and its water discharges are considered slightly moderated. The maximum altitude of the territory is 1,424 meters over sea level and the lowest altitude is 89 meters over sea level. The drainage network that feeds the main source is La Poza creek, which originates from the Usulután volcano and it flows through the neighborhoods of El Juguete, at El Palmital county; El Pozo Nacional, La Ermita at Las Trancas county and Los Martínez at Las Pozas county; El Mora and El Rodeo at El Talpetate county.

La Poza microbasin, before its intervention, was characterized by a continuous deforestation process, especially at its upper and middle basin, that was evident on the cutting of trees and other vegetation. This process was aggravated by the impact of the coffee crisis, which destroyed the shade trees and coffee plantations, turning big productive units into small farms growing staple grains and small living lots.

The lack of access of the community to drinkable water affected more than 15 thousand people, who did not count on water at their houses. Those people that were taking water from springs were not sure about its quality.

The growing pressure over vegetation directly affects the exhaustion of water sources in the area, mainly in the lower section of the river basin. The main rivers and wells showed a steady flow decrease as well as an evident reduction on water levels, resulting on some rivers drying out during certain time of year. This situation seriously affected several community activities developed, both, at home and at agricultural and livestock units.

Aside from the deforestation process and changes in soil usage, a growing pollution level of water resources was taking place, due to solid waste and improper disposal of community sewage. As a result, rivers and creeks had practically turned into dumpsters and public sewages where varied types of waste were carried. Also, the local cultural farming practices were not ecologically friendly because of the continued use of agrochemical products and slash and burning methods, practices that in the long run reduce soil productivity and contribute to the erosion, thus affecting rivers and water storage.

In both Ozatlan and Usulután municipalities, there was a socio-institutional gap regarding the promotion of a behavioral change on different actors and inadequate practices regulations. Also, these regions lacked water resources awareness and knowledge about water issues and plans which would help to adequately guide and organize actions to face the growing degradation of water resource. Besides, they lacked economical resources and volunteer labor to promote proper integrated water resources management.

3. The Answer

In the La Poza microbasin indifference prevailed towards natural resources preservation by the Public Health and Social Assistance Ministry, the Municipality, national police and the education system (teachers and students). Also, population was not aware of this issue and there was a lack of will from the public sector. For this reason, actions taken in La Poza microbasin began with a training process addressed to the community and the representative institutions in the area. It is important to mention that before the intervention community was already organized around boards and development communal associations (ADESCOS). The organization promoted social issues but an integrated focus on water resources management was not included as a key issue. Besides, absence of a legal framework in the country was an obstacle to actions aimed to promote proper integrated water resource management.

It is not until 1999, that the AGUA project (funded by USAID and executed during the period of mid 1999 to the first quarter of 2005), began activities in the region through FUNDAMUNI, in alliance with CARE, SALVANTURA and SACDEL. The project aimed to the development of a model that can be replicated for sustained and integrated handling of water resources in the country through potable water access to rural areas, and as part of a social and environmental sustainability process. Six municipalities from Usulután were included in this project, including Usulután and Ozatlan.

Through the AGUA project, FUNDAMUNI identified the community board and ADESCOS leaders and participative processes for local development were implemented. This NGO, with an extensive experience in the local development processes and water management, received funds from USAID, to take the process forward. The objectives pursued by the project were: a) To look after and protect natural resources: soil, water, fauna and flora. b) Harvesting water for present and future generations.

In order to implement these actions, the process began from micro to macro aspects, that is, from microbasin to subbasin, and finally to the basin. In this process local social partners were strengthened in the assimilation of concepts, methods, planning and problem solving activities. Local actors assimilated the concept of river basin and integrated water resource management, and they became familiarized with their territory. As a result of this process, the community understands the concept of river basin, as well as, how water cycle works and how to tackle these issues in an integrated manner.

The Managing Committee of La Poza microbasin was created as part of the actions to address the critical situation of water resources in the micro basin. As a way to encourage its creation, training on organization matters was delivered to establish their organizational structure. This committee is formed by community leaders and began activities in 2002. The water resource management activities include the municipality of Ozatlan and the Northwest of Usulután, with the counties of La Presa, El Talpetate and Ojo de Agua.

An awareness process was developed for the implementation of the payment for environmental services as a financial mechanism that contributes with water resources preservation. This process started with the identification of four water administration boards, which received environmental services from the microbasin. These organisms, in exchange for the benefits they get from the microbasins resources, make payments for environmental services, which have been invested in the building of slope creeks, infiltration wells and hedgerows. Implementing these actions was a mid term process that required lobbying and involvement between several local social partners.



Investment in soil-preservation projects

Other action that has contributed to the organizational strengthening is the continuous training process in subjects such as leadership, environment, micro basin management: its characteristics, basin information and the water cycle. As part of this process exploration fieldtrips have been made in the microbasin area, with the participation of leaders, community leaders, local development committee of Ozatlan, water boards, Municipalities, public institutions, police, and schools. This training was delivered by FUNDAMUNDI in monthly sessions, during one and a half year period. These training programs allowed the increase of participation levels in formulating the Microbasin Management Plan.

In 2004, several workshops were organized in order to elaborate the Management Plan of the microbasin La Poza. The plan was formulated with the participation of community leaders through workshops where

problems, needs and demands of the community located in the micro basin were identified. This process included the support of FUNDAMUNDI technicians for the identification of priorities that were required for the formulation of the microbasin management plan.

The resulting plan included the following components: a) soil and water; b) legal component; c) basic rural sanitation; d) strengthening of the board of directors; and e) fund raising. The Management Plan of La Poza microbasin became an important tool which eased the work and the articulation of the process by the local social partners and towards the exterior. The making of the plan, as mentioned before, took place in the years 2003/2004, and resulted in the prioritization of the problems to be solved. This plan is the result of joined efforts by the Northwest Inter-canton Development Committees of Usulután Municipality, the Development Committee of Ozatlan-CODEMOZ, municipal councils, inhabitants, organizations and institutions that aid the development process in the area.

Simultaneously, extended assemblies took place in order to validate the documents and create a microbasin organization, with social partners from both municipalities (Ozatlan y Usulután). This microbasin organization will take part on the implementation and follow-up of the plan. This role was taken up by the Managing Committee created in 2002. After this, a legalization process started, and allowed the creation of a legal organization called “Association for the Development and Protection of La Poza Microbasin” (ASDEPROMIPO).

Other activities performed are: Cleaning campaigns, water studies and workshops to analyze results, community meetings, meetings held with Water Boards already in place, reaching of agreements between Water Committees and the Management Committee, dealing with the fund of payment for environmental services, as well as the use of such fund.

There were several resources and projects that were handled: a) Protection of the water resource in La Poza microbasin, funded by USAID and FUNDAMUNDI; b) Soil-preservation activities, funded by CHF, Water Systems Management Boards and Management Committee, c) Environmental education in the local media through radio and TV, formation of brigades, funded by the Water Systems Management Boards; d) River Basin Tour, funded by the Management Committee and the School center of Ojo de Agua canton.

In 2008, the Association for Development and Protection of La Poza Microbasin (ASDEPROMIPO) - known as the Managing Committee of La Poza microbasin- is composed of 11 members. Member institutions and organizations include: leader structures from both municipalities -Usulután and Ozatlan-; ADESCOS; water boards and the Local Development Committee.

4. Results Analysis

In accordance with key social partners' observation in Ozatlan and Usulután, the labor of ASDEPROMIPO up to date has been effective. Thanks to the work and proposals of the committee, it has been possible to ease the performing of initiatives of soil preservation efforts that Water Boards had identified, but had not been implement before. Initiatives that have already been implemented up to this time have generated benefits at several levels: preservation efforts in the upper micro basin has being positive for the committees in their role as water system administrators, since it helps to preserve the water they use. Also, these preservation efforts have aided the increase of water infiltration, which has mitigated the damage storms caused in the area.

The participation of the Water Committees in the managing of the funds collected through environmental services payment has allowed the successful implementation of this financial mechanism. At first, some issues raised with some Water Boards, who were reluctant and mistrusting about this collection, and asked “How are these funds to be managed?” Nonetheless, after realizing that they, themselves would handle and invest those funds; they wholeheartedly collaborated with the implementation of the mechanism.

There is a high level of community participation in the training process, planning, implementation of payment for environmental services, investments in preservation efforts, decision making, etc. Nevertheless, some water users, mainly cooperatives and individual producers, have not been able to join the process, mainly due to the lack of attention given to this sector through a work strategy.

Within the framework of the joint efforts of the members of the Water Boards, some accountability issues have popped up in some members, expressed as lack of punctuality, little participation –both in meetings as in follow-up of agreements-. In some cases this is a result of unavailability of economical resources for transportation, difficulties for leaving housework chores unattended and even apathy towards community work.

A very important factor in this process is the community support, which is key for success and recognition. The initiative has counted on the support of a major segment of the community, since water is a topic that raises big interest, and is thought as a vital resource in the territory. Therefore, there is a favorable opinion towards the project, the microbasin organization and all activities that have been taking place.

The territorial alliances between private and public social actors have been instrumental for the achievement of the results. Amongst the partners and institutions that interact with the Microbasin Managing Committee, there are: Water Management Systems Boards, providing financial and human resources, the Environmental Unit of the Usulután Municipality, that manages environmental projects which protect water resources and installs systems for rain water harvesting; the Environmental Department of the National Civilian Police, which handles formal reports and supervises tours to the microbasin; Formal Education System (Ojo de Agua and La Preza schools), which provide infrastructure for holding activities and meetings and allow participation of teachers and students in certain scheduled activities; the Media, that contributes to spread ideas that build awareness in the population.

Other institutions, such as NGOs and supporting entities, as well as United Nations organisms, have collaborated either through direct support or with facilitation of interrelated local development processes.

During the last two years the Committee has been actively involved with GWP El Salvador, in the framework of a project of governability for the management of water resources. Thanks to the GWP support, the committee has been trained on the contents of the governmental proposal for the General Water Law and they have had access to studies on surface waters' pollution. The committee has also begun lobbying to work at the territorial level, and it has been able to joint efforts with other national social partners to solve national issues relating to water resources management.

The La Poza Microbasin Committee shows a great ability to continue working and it has created a structure able to project its labor to the future, thanks to the level of citizen involvement it has promoted. As an example, organizational statutes establish the realization of periodical assemblies to inform the community on the labor carried on, as well as to listen to suggestions and promote debate as means to better problem-solution. This allows for a better coordination within the community by giving room to debate and strategic decision making. Participation is intended to be two-way, between the committee and its members. It is worth mentioning the leadership profile shown by the committee coordinator, Ms Ana del Sagrario Hernandez, whose role has been instrumental for achieving this level of success.

The main changes achieved with the creation of this Committee include: increased water harvesting, improvement of vegetation coverage area through reforestation, reduction of non-environmentally-friendly practices, such as land burning in the microbasin highlands, greater control over tree-cutting, higher level of local awareness on water issues and citizen involvement on water resources management.

The government, through the Environmental and Natural Resources Ministry, has been able to provide human resources to aid and advise the microbasin's committee. This support is funded by the Spanish Agency for International Aid, (AECI), and this funding allows for the activities' follow-up.

Today, the community of La Poza microbasin, counts on better mechanisms for citizen participation, understanding, dialogue and coordination, all of them non-existent elements before this experience was in place. It has also been possible to intermingle different local social partners, including water boards, community development committees and boards, as well as the local development committee, public entities within the area, local government and NGOs.

5. Lessons Learned

Generally speaking, the resulting benefits as well as the involvement of various agents and partners, have promoted the creation of environmental awareness.

The job done has been difficult, and the volunteering of the committee members is an outstanding effort. The most worthy achievement during the first year of labor is that the legal personality lends external legal backing, which strengthens the managing abilities of all members.

The factors that contributed to the formation of the Association for La Poza microbasin are, firstly, the people's willingness for working, and the citizen participation - involving community boards and associations, water boards, Local Development Committees, public agencies- that has allowed a social joint coordination. FUNDAMUNI contribution on environmental education, training, and community awareness has been fundamental for the continuity of activities. This organization has also been fundamental in planning and performing activities, and in the investment for concrete projects such as water provision for the communities, building creeks, hedgerows, reforestation, and infiltration wells. FUNDAMUNI has also implemented new financial instruments, such as payment for environmental services, which allows investment continuity, as well as providing people motivation for continue working.



Building of hedgerows

All social partners need to be involved in the Microbasin work. Some interviewed leaders say that a higher degree of involvement from varied partners should have been promoted. These leaders claim that these partners stood aside and even became an obstacle for the advance of some activities at certain times of the project. Therefore, it is required and urgent to involve other social partners and improve the external alliances, in order to foster microbasin managing projects.

By having self-funding and volunteering mechanisms in place, it has been possible to maintain the initiative, develop it and also achieve certain status as a successful experience. This generates a higher level of commitment by social partners, since they not only depend on external support. Thus, the lesson learned is that external funding contributes to the achievements of goals; nevertheless it's important to have local investment, to achieve a better ownership of the results and the actions taken.

The local charge for environmental services has serious limitations if there is not a legal framework that backs up such organization and financial mechanism. The country lacks of a General Water Law, which results in no legal backup for these financial mechanisms. As a result, the projection of this initiative is limited, since it does not count on a supporting institutional framework for advancing and consolidating its work. This initiative largely depends on scarce local resources and international aid.

The legal framework is not sufficient, but it is surely required for the conformation of the microbasin to provide it with institutional status and promote local environmental management. Thus, the initiative has gone on without needing a legal framework, but surely such framework would help improving results and make things easier.

As per the resources, they are largely executed through community efforts, and with their own resources; however, additional capital is required, albeit from local government (mainly Usulután, since Ozatlán is already collaborating); from central government, and international aid, but without losing the level of autonomy and self-determination which has characterized the microbasin project.

El Salvador deals with serious issues on availability of good quality water in several communities. Also, it is a territory highly threatened by destruction of important recharging areas. Therefore, the implementation of this initiative shows how to work in a participative way with local social partners, promoting socio-institutional capital for an adequate management of water resources.

Replication

This experience can be replicated in other areas within or outside the country, given that certain basic conditions are met, like a project which provides funds to begin the process and technical advisory; and willingness and ability from the participating NGO for accompanying and providing follow up to the process.

To foster similar experiences in other regions, it is required that all the benefits of this experience are known and acquired by other social partners. The Association has already taken part in the exchange of microbasin management experiences with several communities around the country, aiming to replicate the project; nevertheless, this has not been possible yet.

Active community involvement and its motivation for relevant problem-solving are two key aspects for the replicability of this process. Without participation, it would be very difficult to involve community in the different tasks that call for volunteering, donating time to the community, responsibility and, above all, disposition to pay for environmental services.

6. Contacts and references

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