



Revolutionary Grandmothers and Radical Engineers: Venezuela's Technical Water Committees

Rebecca McMillan and Susan Spronk

A little known fact about Venezuela is that grandmothers and engineers are at the forefront of the struggle to improve access to water and sanitation in poor neighborhoods.

Residents of Antimano's *barrios* (informal settlements), mostly women in their golden years, meet regularly with representatives from Caracas' public utility to monitor services and help plan state-financed infrastructure development.

They are members of the "technical water committees" (or *mesas técnicas de agua*, MTAs), a radical experiment in participatory urban planning implemented nation-wide by former president Hugo Chávez.

The MTAs have transformed water service delivery in Caracas, an effective example of how popular power is built in the country's Bolivarian Process. The Process, initiated by Chávez in 1999, promotes participatory democracy as a tool for reversing political and economic exclusion. Thanks to heavy state investment in water and sanitation infrastructure and this participatory methodology, Venezuela now has 96 percent coverage in potable water, one of the highest rates in the region.

In her SSHRC-funded research project, Dr. Susan Spronk is examining the potential of such forms of citizen participation or "coproduction" to promote more equitable service provision in the global South, focusing on case studies in Venezuela and Bolivia. Spronk and ►



Some of Antímano's most active MTA participants (Left to right): Nancy la Rosa, Rosalba Ruíz, Luz Darianis, Florencia Gutiérrez, Pedra Escalona, and Sulay Morales.

Government bureaucrats in air-conditioned offices still retain a high degree of control in selecting and prioritizing community projects.

graduate student Rebecca McMillan were in Venezuela in the fall of 2012.

In their 2013 article, *Grandmothers and Engineers: The Heads and Hearts of Venezuela's Bolivarian Process*, Spronk and McMillan explore the successes and limitations of the MTA experience. The article, published in Harvard University's *ReVista* Magazine, argues that the MTAs have dramatically improved the relationship between citizens and state agencies, leading to impressive service improvements. However, they now confront two of the Chávez government's most daunting adversaries: bureaucracy and inefficiency.

Caracas: A Tale of Two Cities

Caracas' water system is one of the most complex in the world. Given the city's mountainous topography and the dense peri-urban barrios that climb its hillsides, providing universal access to water and sanitation is no easy feat.

Before the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, the Caracas water policy was highly discriminatory. The city center and eastern middle-class suburbs, where most residents self-identify as "white" according to the recent census, benefited from high-quality public services, while the sprawling poor settlements of western Caracas, where most of the residents identify as "mixed" race, developed

informally in the absence of attention from the state.

No systematic, planned expansion of water networks existed in the popular sectors until very recently. In fact, in the mid-1990s informal settlements such as Antímano (with over 150,000 inhabitants) did not even appear on city maps.

Infrastructure investments in the barrios have developed in a piecemeal fashion, usually following the logic of clientelistic networks of the government of the day. In many cases, neighborhoods have constructed their own illegal connections. The result has been what urban geographer Karen Bakker describes as an "archipelago": incomplete, fractured water and sanitation networks, and highly uneven service access within neighborhoods.

Discontent with the water service reached its climax in the 1990s. At that time, many households in the barrios only received piped water every two months, if at all. Water protests occurred daily in Caracas.

In response, Caracas mayor Aristóbulo Istúriz (1993-1995) proposed the MTAs as a way to channel citizens' frustration into a proactive search for solutions. His government implemented the model in two pilot parishes (a subdivision of the municipality): Antímano and El Valle. The early efforts were so successful that when Chávez

took office in 1999, he set out to reproduce the experience across Venezuela. Today there are an astonishing 9,000 MTAs nation-wide, which have implemented over 1,500 community-managed infrastructure projects.

Building Water Democracy

Much of the debate in water politics has focused on private versus public ownership. But cases such as Venezuela demonstrate that solutions to the water problem cannot depend on this simple dichotomy. Like in Caracas in the past, most utilities throughout the global South have failed to serve the urban and peri-urban poor, regardless of who owns and operates them. Consequently, the Red Vida, Latin America's most important anti-privatization network, emphasizes that the planning and delivery of services must also be democratic. They call for citizen participation in the management of urban water utilities as one way of exercising social control.

In Red Vida's view, community service management is a way of changing decision-making structures in urban planning, as well as a strategy for empowering the poor through experiences in organization and self-management.

International development institutions such as the World Bank have also advocated for participation in service provision. But unlike the social movements' demand for "water democracy," which is ultimately about changing power relations, the mainstream approach focuses only on improving service efficiency and does not place enough emphasis on the need for heavy public investment in networked infrastructure.

This narrower vision usually limits participation to fairly passive forms of consultation or "voluntary" labor contributions for water projects, instead of transferring real decision-making power. Moreover, these initiatives are rarely accompanied by a significant redistribution of resources, as in Venezuela.

Questioning the Experts

Spronk and McMillan argue that the Venezuelan model has been so successful because it seeks to directly challenge poverty and inequality, which are the roots of water deprivation, rather than just work around them for more technically efficient service delivery like in many mainstream development approaches.

One way they do this is through a participatory educational methodology based on the work of popular educator Paulo Freire. The methodology aims to raise participants' consciousness of oppression as a springboard for political action. It also challenges the intellectual division between those who plan and make decisions (the bureaucrats and technocrats) and the citizenry. This "questioning the experts" is an important part of the transition to a new model of participatory democracy where organized citizens would take on many of the functions of the state, a process referred to as building "popular power."

When a community starts an MTA, they follow three steps. First, they draw a map and conduct a census of the community. Self-mapping is important because community members are the only ones who know where they have laid their pipes. By putting their neighborhoods on a map, they are also inserting the barrios into the political landscape of the city. The process itself helps residents build a collective history of their neighborhood, linking service deprivations with political and economic exclusion. Community members subsequently begin to see their water advocacy as part of a broader struggle for social justice. In cooperation with the water utility, the community then diagnoses its water problems and plans solutions.

This the new relationship between the utility and the community is a significant departure from the previous era, when staff of the city's water utility, Hidrocapital, would not ►



"No one is going to give us power. We need to take it ourselves."

(Carmen Rojas, community activist and MTA participant)

Barriolita residents explain their water problems to Hidrocapital engineer Daniel Pereira.

even set foot in the barrios and as Víctor Díaz, Coordinator of the utility's Community Management Office put it, "planned everything from their air-conditioned offices."

The model has also translated into real service improvements. In Antimano, several major infrastructure projects have been planned and implemented with community participation, reducing water cycles in some sectors from every two months to as little as every eight days or even continuous service in some sectors. The service has also become much more predictable so residents no longer plan their lives around water. However, challenges still remain.

Popular Power from the Top Down?

While the utility is now more responsive to communities, it is difficult to discern how much decision-making power the MTAs have in practice. Government bureaucrats in air-conditioned offices still retain a high degree of control in selecting and prioritizing community projects. For community activists, this means that true popular power is a long way off.

The bureaucratic agencies also work at a far slower rate than the community organizations, frequently falling short of people's heightened expectations.

Despite persistent promises that water cycles will be shortened, some sectors still only receive water every 21 days, for 3 days at a time. One sector in Antimano is still waiting for a project that they've been pushing for since 2003. And community members often have to play institutional ping-pong, pitching proposals to a plethora of state agencies before securing support.

This points to a difficult balance that the government tries to achieve: incorporating checks and balances to ensure accountability, while also being flexible enough to respond to the needs of communities. The balancing act does not always succeed.

But the problem of bureaucracy is not only a problem of inefficiency or excessive paperwork. Many believe that the MTAs and other community organizations have become too top-down. From the government's perspective, institutionalizing the organizations is essential for strengthening the Bolivarian Process and giving communities the support they need to carry out their work.

However, for community organizers the government's top-down directives can be a source of frustration. Some even believe that by making organizations jump through administrative hoops, the government is attempting to neutralize their ability to organize outside of state-sanctioned channels – a way of controlling them.

Top-down control becomes more serious when state officials actively resist MTAs' efforts to influence decision-making. As water reformer Santiago Arconada suggests, the leadership of the water utility and the municipality are often reluctant to cede greater responsibilities to the communities because it means giving up their own privileges.

In this context, participants in the MTAs and other community organizations in Venezuela find themselves torn between maintaining their firm commitment to the government while also denouncing the negative elements of the process such as bureaucracy and inefficiency.

Excessive state dependence also threatens the technical water committees' long-term sustainability, since it is unclear if they could outlast a change in administration at the national level.

Recognizing this, Hidrocapital's Víctor Díaz, himself an Antimano resident, admonishes the parish's MTA participants to assert their independence and put pressure on the state to live up to its promises: "If the opposition wins one day, I won't be here anymore. A new government will bring in different civil servants. This is why you need to learn to be autonomous."

Victor's statement strikes at the heart of one of the central contradictions of the Process: to what extent can popular power be decreed from above?

Spronk and McMillan conclude that future efforts to improve services and build popular power will depend on both state-supported participatory efforts backed by strong public financing such as the MTAs – what development scholars refer to as "invited" spaces for participation – and grassroots organizing that can challenge the status quo and push for deeper structural change, or "invented" spaces for participation.

Carmen Rojas, community activist and MTA participant, sums up the major challenge going forward: "No one is going to give us power. We need to take it ourselves." ■



Rebecca McMillan is a graduate student in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa. She was in Caracas from August to December 2012 doing field research on the *mesas técnicas de agua and sanitation politics*.



Susan Spronk teaches international development at the University of Ottawa. She is a research associate with the Municipal Services Project www.municipalservicesproject.org/.