

Water administration in rural and indigenous contexts: the case of the Association of Water Management Committees in the Municipality of Sitalá (APAMS)

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— Abstract —

The objective of this essay is to deepen the knowledge about community organizational experiences that ensure access to water in rural and indigenous contexts in Chiapas. Based on the case of the Asociación de Patronatos de Agua del Municipio de Sitalá (APAMS), we analyze the experience of more than four years of an organizational process that has involved various challenges and lessons learned, as a case that can inspire other organizational processes in Chiapas and southeastern Mexico. APAMS has promoted diverse actions within the communities, which have allowed it to legitimize its role as a spokesperson for community needs and proposals. Above all, it has placed Sitalá on the state stage, gradually advancing in the fulfillment of human rights to water and sanitation. Nevertheless, the association continues to confront multiple challenges, underscoring the ongoing imperative to enhance internal processes and external collaborations.

Keywords:

Water management committees; community management; human rights; governance; sanitation.

This article is based on the author's work experience, about promoting, advising, and assisting in the construction of an organizational process of water boards in the municipality of Sitalá. The experience is based on being part of the work team of the civil association Cántaro Azul.¹ Therefore, it is an essay that is based on experiential learning over 4 years of linkage with community leaders and actors of various kinds that have been part of the organizational experience in question.

Access to water is a social necessity of vital importance for families and communities to be able to live in a dignified manner, as water is an essential element to ensure health and other associated rights, such as education, a healthy environment, among others. However, there is a gap in access to water for domestic use with notable differences between urban and rural areas. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), household drinking water coverage in Latin America reaches only 35% in rural areas, while coverage in urban areas reaches 90% (UNESCO, 2022).

Throughout the rural territories of Latin America and the Caribbean, there are community organizations that are born out of the collective need for water for the families' subsistence. These community organizations have improved the living conditions of the families they serve. However, the challenges they face are daunting. This is due to the fact that most of them operate with minimal or no collaboration from the government institutions responsible for providing basic water and sanitation services.

In the Latin American region, these community organizations are known as Community Water and Sanitation Service Organizations (OCSAS), which are defined as social structures that have emerged to support efforts to ensure water management (UNESCO, 2022). Several cases have been documented where OCSAS practice peer-to-peer strengthening, the development of articulated actions from the municipal to the international level, and undertake actions to increase the scope of results that would be less effective if each acted alone.

From my experience, under the imaginary of "OCSAS associativity", we can understand the articulation between OCSAS as the scaling up of the scope and capacities of action of community organizations, which generate their own mechanisms of linkage with other actors, depending on the agreements and needs, and which integrates a wide variety of community organizational forms.

1 Cántaro Azul is a civil association based in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, which has been working in municipalities in the Altos de Chiapas region for more than a decade; to learn more, please visit their website: <https://www.cantaroazul.org/mision-y-vision>.

This essay aims to contribute to the knowledge about the organizational processes of water committees and boards, and to the debate about the need to scale up collective action from the community bases in order to advance in guaranteeing human rights to water and sanitation, taking as reference the Chiapas case from the Asociación de Patronatos de Agua del Municipio de Sitalá (APAMS).

It is a priority to analyze the situation experienced by community organizations in relation to water, since in the recent decade a variety of challenges continue to prevail with respect to the implementation of the human rights to water and sanitation, where water governance continues to have utopian overtones in terms of the design and execution of public policies in accordance with the rural realities of Chiapas and Mexico.

STATUS OF COMMUNITY WATER MANAGEMENT IN MEXICO AND CHIAPAS

In several Caribbean, Central, and South American countries, the associativity of community organizations has been practiced with greater tradition. While in Mexico, there are few examples of this type, but with a long tradition of struggle in other contexts, such as resistance to large dams (which has led to the relocation of many communities) or to the excessive extraction and pollution by mining companies and other extractivist modalities.

In the rural experiences in Mexico, the associativity of community water organizations is being practiced as little of a strategy for scaling up advocacy processes and territorial strengthening of the agendas of these community organizations. However, community water management experiences in Mexico are becoming increasingly visible. Within the few existing cases, in indigenous and rural territories of Chiapas, processes are being developed based on the importance of the union between communities to achieve common objectives based on the felt needs regarding access to water and sanitation.

In the rural and indigenous territories of Chiapas, various social actors have carried out actions within the framework of community water management, with the main objective of achieving significant improvements in access to water. Understanding community water management as a collective practice that seeks to solve the problem of equitable access to water and sanitation services in order to meet the needs of families, collectives, and communities (own adaptation based on Cántaro Azul, 2023). In this entity, the crisis of access to water and sanitation services is notorious and has been a fundamental element in the situation of marginalization in which thousands of communities live. Between the Central Altiplano and

the Northern Mountains, the scenario around community water management involves community representation structures known as “water committees”² which, with the support of their communities, have promoted and sustained collective actions to address water needs.

Water committees are generally part of an honorary community service (they do not receive a salary or economic gratification), as this is the main element that implies that the people in this type of position are renewed every year so that several inhabitants of the community comply with this type of services for the collective benefit. They are representative structures designated by community assemblies for a group of people to carry out the necessary tasks to make possible accessing water for the families of a community. Their work is normally focused on operational issues such as the care of springs and the maintenance of community water systems, but they also take on representation and negotiation functions before external actors (city hall, state or federal water sectors, among others). Some authors citing the characteristics of water committees in rural Chiapas are Murillo and Soares (2017).

However, local actions increasingly require the scaling up of processes to confront the multiple crises that affect water issues in rural and indigenous contexts. Given the need for greater outreach, the associativity of community water organizations is demonstrating several advantages as a mechanism to build collective work agendas at different scales, where water committees and boards of committees are key subjects in the development of solutions to address the problems affecting the population they represent.

Faced with the diverse challenges of the substantial implementation of the human right to water in Chiapas, inter-community organization processes are being developed, which have materialized in the form of “water committees associations”. Particularly in the municipalities of Sitalá and Chenalhó, cases are developing where the water committees are assuming the need to organize among equals, considering the benefits of acting and strengthening collectively. Specifically, APAMS is the main actor in the present essay.

Commonly, when a water committee exists, it is largely due to the existence of community piped water systems. However, thousands of homes in the Tseltal and Tsotsil territories of Chiapas still do not have piped water service. In other cases, several of the water systems implemented by the Mexican government have become obsolete shortly after starting operations, reflecting the limited capacity of government institutions to ensure the sustainability of the systems installed.

2 In other areas of Chiapas, such as the Comité Plateau or the Central Depression, the name used is “water committees”.

Thus, in various collective analyses, together with civil society organizations (CSOs), the water boards have been defining proposals for better social conditions to make substantial progress in solving community needs. Among the analyses carried out, the importance of promoting and strengthening collaborative relations with the Mexican State stands out, especially with municipal councils and other government agencies that have jurisdiction over water and sanitation services; in other words, collaboration with these agencies is sought because it is their obligation to develop actions, according to the legal frameworks at the federal and state levels.

The creation of water committees associations is based on the importance of the rural sector having a legitimate representation in the spaces for reaching agreements with key actors of the governmental entities. Based on this situation, community management of water and sanitation is recognized as a series of solutions based on organized citizenship.

APAMS INTEGRATION PROCESS

The situation in Sitalá indicates that 59% of the municipality's population lacks access to water and drainage in their homes, and 69% are in a situation of extreme poverty (Secretaría de Bienestar, 2024). What can be observed in the territory shows an even more serious situation, due to the fact that several of the water systems installed in recent decades have become obsolete and without follow-up by the competent authorities; this has been corroborated in several visits to the territory over the past several years, and contrasted with the testimonies of various community actors in dozens of workshops and exchanges of experiences over the past several years.

In the recent history of Sitalá, the fact that a few decades ago land tenure prevailed in the hands of a small group of landowners who held significant power in the social and political life of this territory stands out. This situation was gradually changing through social mobilizations that modified land tenure conditions, the most recent stage being the armed uprising of the EZLN, where several groups from Sitalá managed to obtain land to found their own communities (Bobrow-Strain, 2015).

In this context of remarkable changes in recent decades, APAMS was created in 2019 with the will of various community leaders who decided to organize to seek solutions to the difficult situation they live in terms of lack of basic water and sanitation services, linked to a historical omission of municipal councils that have not prioritized attention to rural communities and have not been able to position Sitalá before state and federal agencies.

In the same scenario of the creation of APAMS, various initiatives of civil society organizations converged, which in 2019 were developing a territorial alliance project called "Alianza Crecer Juntos por Sitalá", where

three organizations in particular were working on the strategic axis called "Water and Territory" (Cántaro Azul, Cooperación and Organización Integral para el Desarrollo Rural AC. (CONIDER) and **Diseño y Capacitación para el Desarrollo y las Microfinanzas** (DICADEM). This alliance was visualizing the possibility of promoting organizational processes among water committees, in work sessions where Cántaro Azul positioned the ideas around the strengthening of the water boards at the intercommunity level, which would entail reaching agreements so that the actions and proposals of the community water managers could have an impact on the decisions and actions of government institutions.

In December 2019, the first municipal assembly for water was held in the municipal capital of Sitalá, where representatives of several communities attended, some of them where Cántaro Azul has worked, several others where CONIDER and DICADEM have had a greater focus on community work, and, at the same time, more than half of these community representatives participated, in that year, in another organizational process known as the dialogue space "*Tsoblej Slekuttesel Sitalá*".³ As an agreement of this first assembly, it was decided to promote the municipal articulation of community leaders in order to seek solutions to the various water-related problems of the communities they represented. Thus began the organizational process that today defines itself as APAMS.

After the first municipal assembly, three more assemblies were held, which had both a resolute and formative character, where the decision-making mechanisms and the priority issues to be addressed in the assemblies began to take shape depending on the objectives that were agreed upon by the water committees. Ideally, the assemblies should have been monthly, but the rhythm was interrupted due to the health contingency of the COVID-19 pandemic. Having a break between April and August 2020. The micro-regional assemblies were held once again in September, October, and November of the same year.

In December 2020, the First Municipal Listening Forum on water and sanitation was held in Sitalá. This was the first experience of strategic action where preparation sessions had to be held to plan several of the details for the dialogue that was expected to be held with different governmental institutions, including the Municipal Council. The event was co-convened by Cántaro Azul, CONIDER, and DICADEM, under the "Water and Territory" working group of the Alianza Crecer Juntos por Sitalá.

3 The broad participation of community leaders who were part of the "*Tsoblej Slekuttesel Sitalá*" is due to the fact that the internal process of this dialogue space resulted in the collective analysis that the main problem to be solved in the territory of Sitalá is access to water for Sitalá families (followed by other problems related to health, sanitation, the coffee market, and others).

The objective of the Forum was to promote a direct dialogue between the community and government sectors to link needs, initiatives, and proposals for collaboration among the participating actors. As for government institutions, delegates and representatives of the following institutions were present: National Water Commission (CONAGUA), the State Water Institute (INESA), the State Human Rights Commission (CEDH), the Roads and Hydraulic Infrastructure Commission (CCeIH), among others. One of the factors to achieve good attendance was the fact that a visit by the CONAGUA's sub-director to a couple of localities of Sitalá was organized weeks before, where he accompanied INESA. The result of the Listening Forum dialogue was the signing of voluntary agreements to promote strategic actions to advance the fulfillment of the human rights to water and sanitation for the communities associated with APAMS.

While planning the First Listening Forum, in the micro-regional assemblies of October 2020, they identified that the organizational process of water committees needed to have its own name, leaving it as a decision to keep its current name (APAMS) and defining who would be the community spokespersons in the dialogue with government institutions. With the passage of time, the APAMS representation structure would take on the current name of the Board of Directors.

One of the most important achievements of the first Listening Forum was to position Sitalá and APAMS on the institutional radar, since before this event, Sitalá was largely unknown in the scope of territorial knowledge of public servants, despite being at the top of the statistics of social marginalization. As an example of this, in 2021, we were able to develop collaborations with INESA, through which we managed to manage more than 400 home water filters, which benefited an equal number of households distributed in 13 rural localities of Sitalá. It should be noted that initially, Sitalá was not included in the list of municipalities prioritized by INESA, but it was taken up by the people who represented this Institute in the First Listening Forum.

At the beginning of APAMS (2019-2020), it is worth mentioning the *Tsoblej Sle kubtesel Sitalá* as a fundamental element in the creation of APAMS, since, from the first municipal water assembly, they attended the call, contributing a large proportion of the participants, being active in convening water boards or other types of representation of the communities where they came from. And being promoters within their communities about the importance of having a stronger community organization that has the ability to promote significant changes to address the problems around water, sanitation, health, family economies, and other strategic issues that they identified in their internal analysis.

APAMS ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Currently, the APAMS is made up of 35 rural Tseltal communities. Amount that has been fluctuating since 2019, having greater stability from 2022. Some communities, through their water boards, have decided not to stick with the APAMS, while several others have joined at different times. Each community associated with the APAMS has a water board that represents them in municipal assemblies. These water boards are responsible for representing the needs and interests of their community before the APAMS and before external actors such as government institutions. While, in communities where they have piped water systems, they carry out maintenance and improvement actions throughout the water system, including the catchment area; within their communities, they are the ones who convene community assemblies in case of having to make important decisions about water, in coordination with the main community authority, which is normally the Municipal Rural Agent, in cases where there is an agrarian authority (ejido commissioning).

It should be noted that many communities that joined the APAMS in 2019 and 2020, did not have water boards, but were represented by the municipal agent or the ejidal commissioner, and even by leaders who participated in a personal capacity due to their interest in the subject (but without formal designation of their community assembly). The increase in the number of water boards happened gradually, the most important moment being the promotion of community assemblies in 2021, between the APAMS and the Crecer Juntos Alliance, where some communities formalized the creation of their water boards through community assembly minutes.

The assembly of water boards is the space where the most important decisions about the APAMS are made. Each associated water board has a voice and a vote. While the Board of Directors is responsible for representing the needs, agreements, and proposals of the APAMS, as well as attending to the actions and strategic links with external actors, both governmental and other civil society actors, such as the APAMCH (Association of Water Boards of the Municipality of Chenalhó) and other structures representing Chiapas' water boards and committees. Therefore, the way in which the assemblies of water boards are developed is largely inspired by the mechanisms of community assemblies, such as decision-making spaces.

The organizational process of the APAMS has developed in a challenging context where social dynamics occur within rural communities that in many cases have led to divisionism. Mainly, due to the intervention capacity of political parties and government programs that are executed without the care to promote social cohesion, achieving the opposite due to the prevalence of particular interests before the collective well-being, which implies

contradictions with respect to the social objectives of government programs and political parties. Proof of this, in the recent prioritization exercises for the official mechanism of COPLADEM (Planning Committee for Municipal Development), housing construction has been prioritized due to a long tradition of political parties that have promoted direct agreements with some community groups in order to capitalize on the highest possible number of votes in municipal elections.

This is one of the greatest challenges that APAMS has had because, in 2021, there was little possibility of changing the local political modes of prioritizing needs before COPLADEM. While recently (2024), it is expected to have greater advocacy capacity, it remains to be seen to what extent water and sanitation could be among the main needs prioritized in COPLADEM.

Likewise, the gender issue remains very challenging, while in rural communities, the participation of women has not been given sufficient value. Generally, men do not take into account women's opinions and proposals regarding the problem of water (which is repeated in several other aspects of domestic and community life). However, in recent years, in the spaces of the APAMS there has been progress in the assessment of women's role, the clearest action being the fact that the main position of representation of the APAMS was designated for a woman, based on the decisions of the assembly of water boards. In addition, it is also notable that, since 2021, the number of communities that have integrated at least one woman into water boards has grown.

Regarding the structuring of water boards, in 2021, it should be noted that in 15 communities, the assemblies decided to integrate at least one woman into water boards, an unprecedented situation. This is an achievement of the constant promotion of reflections on women's role in community life. Reflections that have been facilitated by the organizations that make up the Alianza Crecer Juntos por Sitalá; for example, they have reflected on how women live the consequences of the lack of access to water on a daily basis. Currently, in the year 2024, there are 20 communities that have integrated at least one woman into the water boards teams; one of the main objectives for this year is to sustain this number, since this year the majority of the water boards teams associated with APAMS will be renewed.

2022-2024 APAMS STRATEGIC ACTIONS

One of the key processes of APAMS was the generation of its Management Plan. The Plan was developed through a series of workshops in 2022,

concluding the drafting of the document in March 2023.⁴ The Plan's general objective is to promote that the authorities responsible for guaranteeing the human rights to water and sanitation carry out the necessary actions to make infrastructure possible based on the priorities agreed upon by the APAMS, so that communities can enjoy their rights. While the objectives of the construction process⁵ of this Plan were: a) Identify and prioritize the water and sanitation infrastructure needs in the communities; b) Organize the demands of the communities regarding access to water and sanitation; c) Promote the participation of the communities and their representatives in decision-making; d) Ensure follow-up on the agreements reached at the APAMS assemblies.

This plan is aimed primarily at government entities such as the Municipal Council, the National Water Commission, the Roads and Hydraulic Infrastructure Commission of the state of Chiapas, and the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples, seeking to generate and strengthen collaborative relationships to guarantee the human rights to water and sanitation.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the APAMS Management Plan construction process was the reaching of agreements as to which communities would be prioritized first, as opposed to which would be prioritized last. This implied dialogue in which the felt needs of each community were made explicit, but also opened the opportunity to understand that some communities were living a more worrying situation due to the daily complications of not having some factor that would reduce the situation of marginalization. This led some communities to believe that their community could be left in a position of waiting for the communities with the greatest lags in terms of access to water to be taken into account.

The communities that ceded positions had one or more of the following factors: a) they had a community system (although with critical aspects of its operation), b) they had household storage systems in some degree of progress, c) although they depended heavily on water hauling, they had a surface source a few kilometers from the community or even complemented with wells within the community. Among other criteria that were discussed among the water boards.

With a Management Plan in place, APAMS mobilized to request dialogues with different governmental agencies, starting at the municipal level

4 An important element in the construction of the Management Plan was the project of the civil association CONIDER, which formally integrated this initiative into its 2021-2023 project financed by the Gonzalo Río Arronte Foundation. While all the organizations integrated in the Alianza Crecer Juntos made strategic contributions throughout the collective building process as a commitment to the continued strengthening of APAMS.

5 The process involved monthly workshops between August 2022 and January 2023, as well as the generation of community agreements promoted by the water committees before each community assembly, to substantiate the need and interest in developing a collective plan at the APAMS scale.

and going up to federal agencies. During the period from April to December 2023, the company generated various trades, approaches to government actors, and positioning the issue in events and media at regional and national levels. However, practically no significant actions have been taken by government agencies, despite the fact that we have tried to make the problems visible in collaboration with community representatives from other municipalities, such as Berriozábal, Chenalhó, Tenejapa, La Trinitaria, among others.

The strategic action with the greatest media coverage has been the development of the “Agenda Chiapas por el Agua”,⁶ which seeks to lay the foundations for developing a Water Justice Plan for Chiapas. This Agenda was built based on the community voice of different municipalities, including Sitalá, for which meetings were held for the interaction and positioning of community needs and proposals, as well as those of youth and children. In particular, APAMS contributed to the September and November 2023 meetings; while in the latter, there was a more intentional participation of the Tsoblej Sle kubtesel Sitalá.

Within the municipal context of Sitalá, based on the experience of APAMS in the year 2023, by the beginning of 2024, the APAMS Board of Directors decided to promote a strengthening of ties with community-based organizations with which there were varying degrees of alliance and rapprochement. Between February and May of this year, we were able to strengthen and amplify a community alliance that takes up the organizational mechanisms of the Tsoblej Sle kubtesel Sitalá, integrating other community-based organizations, which are: the local group of the state midwives movement *Nich Ixim*, organization of craftswomen *Luchiyej Antsetic ta Sitalá*, municipal organization of honey makers, and the municipal security council (the latter is independent of the municipal government, which takes up the social vision of the local nucleus that previously called itself MODEVITE).⁷

The first action that the Tsoblej Sle kubtesel Sitalá community alliance has taken is to approach the candidates for the municipal presidency within the framework of this year's elections. This resulted in the signing of collaboration agreements that represent a first step to be taken again now that it is known which of the candidates won the municipal presidency. Within the signed agreements it is stated that the new municipal council commits to “define as a municipal priority the attention to the improvement of

6 For a detailed description of the Chiapas Agenda for Water, see: <https://www.cantaroazul.org/agenda-chiapas-por-el-agua>

7 MODEVITE stands for Movement in Defense of Life and Territory. This movement is still in force in Chiapas

water and sanitation services for the communities associated in the Tsoblej Sle kubtesel Sitalá, starting with actions at the community level in the communities prioritized in the Management Plan of the Association of Water Patronages of the Municipality of Sitalá” (Minutes of agreements, between the candidate to municipal presidency for the political party MORENA and the municipal social structures integrated in the Tsoblej Sle kubtesel Sitalá, 2024; internal document). Among other agreements, we will seek to materialize various actions to move forward with greater clarity in the fulfillment of the human rights to water and sanitation, as well as other rights, for the benefit of the communities and families that need them most.

However, this is not the first time that written agreements have been reached between APAMS and government agencies. Therefore, it will be essential to follow up with close collaboration with various stakeholders. The academy is one of the sectors with the least presence in this type of initiative for the promotion of water governance.

APAMS CONTRIBUTION TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHIAPAS

APAMS is a clear reference of the possibilities of community-based organizations for the structuring of proposals to improve conditions in rural life with a social justice perspective. In a few years, APAMS has begun its journey in the territory of Sitalá to build greater opportunities to develop activities with water boards, which positively impact in various ways, especially in improving the coverage and quality of water and sanitation infrastructure.

Community water management, materialized in actions coordinated by water boards, is a mechanism for social participation that has existed in various rural territories in Chiapas for many generations, but is little recognized in legal and institutional frameworks, and faces enormous challenges for its sustainability in different contexts. Therefore, it is urgent to generate public policies and social agreements that strengthen it in order to achieve progress in the fulfillment of the various rights associated with water and sanitation.

In the localities of Sitalá there are examples of the invaluable work of the water boards, but it is also recognized that in many ways the water boards are overwhelmed by the economic, social, technical, and administrative challenges involved in sustaining water and sanitation services in rural communities.

It is important to deepen the knowledge about these organizational expressions that are building proposals for the solution of water and sanitation problems. As well as providing solid proposals, based on local and empirical knowledge, for the strengthening of social subjects that can form social organizations to position the rural sector in the scenario of territorial governance of water and sanitation.

In 2022, the experience of APAMS inspired several water boards in the municipality of Chenalhó, who, at the end of the same year, formalized the creation of their own organizational process, calling themselves the Association of Water Boards of the Municipality of Chenalhó (APAMCH). These water boards of Chenalhó had different approaches with APAMS representatives in events and exchanges of experience, being the most outstanding: the First State Listening Forum held in June 2022 and the Interstate Meeting of Community Water Management held in September 2022.

In this scenario, the organizational processes of water boards and committees have emerged in recent years with the potential to articulate actions between organized civil society and the government sector. Such is the fact of the current collective dream of diverse community representations that are promoting actions towards a water justice plan for Chiapas. This effort will have greater scope to the extent that various sectors of society join in, such as academia, which could contribute not only to the documentation of problems or the design of alternative technologies, but also to the development of community outreach projects with a participatory action research approach.

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