

# Motivating a community to manage their water supply and service

**Some thoughts from Marc Mellin, *Acueducto Comunal de Naranjo***

Based on our experience here in Costa Rica, and assuming that basic human nature is the same most everywhere, I believe the key is to make the community members realize that the water systems is theirs. There has to be a sense of ownership, or else people will never protect and care properly for the system. If a community does not feel that the system's problems are their problems (this happens when a system is managed by an impersonal government bureaucracy), then those problems will always be "someone else's problems." When a community really understands that the success or failure of the water system is the community's responsibility, there will always be enough motivation to make things work.

Here are a few examples of how some (not all) Community Water Districts in Costa Rica have achieved a level of community awareness and involvement that has put them well on the way to guaranteeing sustainability:

**1) The most important component of ownership is that the community has to invest a significant amount of the capital needed to build and maintain their water system.** This capital can take many forms: money, labor (like digging ditches), materials, land (e.g., a lot for a storage tank), cooperation (like a landowner giving permission for a water supply pipe to cross his or her property), or even something as simple as a housewife bringing a pitcher of a cool fruit drink to her neighbors who are digging that ditch. (I can still remember setting down my shovel for a moment and enjoying that refreshing drink!)

The important thing here is that the community had to 'sweat' to get what it needed. There is nothing so sad and frustrating as watching a community sit back while the government or a well-meaning NGO builds a water system, which in a few short months starts to deteriorate and finally falls apart because no one bothered to maintain the system. (This has happened here in my community with another project, fortunately unrelated to the water system.) Why did no one care? Because it didn't cost them anything, because they didn't have to sweat to get it. I think that all societies on Earth share this character trait to one degree or another, and after all it's logical. If a community has to work hard and put forth a significant portion of what it takes to get the water system they need, then you can bet that community will not stand back and watch that water system fall apart. They will defend and protect their system, and that includes electing leaders who will do the same. This concept, called 'sweat equity' in English, is fundamental.

**2) Water meters.** It's hard to count the many reasons why water meters are important to achieve that sense of ownership and for the sustainability of a system.

There are still many communities in Costa Rica that refuse to install water meters in their system, and it's curious to listen to their reasoning. Normally the main objection is that the rates will go up and they will have to pay more for water service. Yes, that's true, but the meter is not at fault. The problem is that a flat rate that allows users to consume (and waste) as much water as they want will

never allow any sense of awareness regarding the true economic value of water (i.e., what it really costs to provide quality water service and guarantee sustainable protection of the source of that water).

I usually have little difficulty in convincing 'flat-rate, no-water-meter users' that water meters make good sense. It's important to talk about the true economic value of water, yes, but that's not what will convince low-income, low-education users, who usually are the most adamant opponents of water meters. I just ask them this question: Is it fair that your family has to pay the same amount of money every month for water as the restaurant down the street who consumes four times as much water (and earns a profit as well) or the hotel in the center of town who uses twenty times as much water (and also earns a profit)?

Then I follow with the second question: Is it fair that your family has to pay the same amount of money every month for water service as your neighbor who has six children, two goats, a pig, and a garden that he irrigates every day during the hottest time of year? Then I finish with the third question (knowing that a water system without meters means there is never enough water to go around): Is it fair that someone in your family has to get up at 4AM to wash clothes, because by 6am so many of your neighbors are wasting so much cheap water that not enough water will come out of your faucet to do the laundry?

Water meters are the perfect social justice instrument, because each family or business pays according to the amount of water they consume, and all of sudden even the people in the higher part of town have water available all day, a luxury that only the customers in the lower part of the system used to enjoy.

Almost all of the metered water systems in Costa Rica use meter housings with latched lids that require a special key to open. In my community we have never agreed with that approach. Our meter housings have lids that anyone can open, and we encourage our users to do just that: open the lid occasionally and note the meter reading. We encourage our users to monitor their family's water consumption that way. We also teach users how to use the water meter to detect leaks in the pipe network within their property. This approach helps users to feel that the water system is really theirs. That signifies ownership.

**3) Community Water Associations are based upon universal participation.** The model that works best for a community association to manage the local water system will be different in each society, but the essential element for the model to work well is universal participation. Everyone drinks water and uses water for multiple purposes, so everyone has a right to voice their opinion at the community association meetings. Normally the right to vote and to serve on the Board of Directors is reserved for adults, which is proper, but every woman, man, and child should be afforded the right to participate in the discussions concerning how the community's water system is managed.

Now don't worry, in a village of 600 people you won't see 400 residents lining up to attend and speak out at a community water board general assembly(!). Sometimes, especially if the community enjoys good water service, you'll be lucky if 30 of those 600 residents bother to attend that assembly. The important thing is that every one of those 600 residents knows that, if they

desire, they have the right to attend that assembly meeting and voice their opinion. That right signifies ownership.

**4) Community Water Boards that are accountable.** In the case of Costa Rica, the 1,600 Community Water Districts are run by Management Associations that are chartered within the framework of a law (the Associations Act) that establishes the basic rules of the game, so to speak. Those rules require the Association to hold a General Assembly meeting at least once a year, and at that meeting the Board of Directors and the Examiner are required to present reports to the Assembly of resident users. I do not know whether or not your country has a similar legal framework within which community associations can be formed. The important thing is that the 'rules of the game' ensure accountability. The community leaders who are elected by the General Assembly of resident users to manage the local water system must know that the community will expect to be informed periodically regarding the decisions the board members have made and the actions they propose for the future. When a community knows that their leaders are accountable to them, that signifies ownership.

**5) Ownership of what?** You can't feel that you own something when you don't know what it is. It never ceases to amaze me how many Community Water Board members in Costa Rica have never even visited the source of their community's water. In that situation, how many of the resident users of that water system do you think have visited the source of the water they drink every day? Not many.

Two years ago our Association celebrated thirty years of community water system management. As one of the activities, we hired two buses and invited the entire community to join us on a field trip to our main spring. On the way home, the buses stopped at the main storage tank that receives the water from several springs. (We felt it was important that people see what happens to the water from the spring after it is taken in by the catchment tank. Over sixty people participated in the activity, and everyone came back home with an appreciation of both the importance of protecting our springs and the complexity involved in getting the water from those springs to come out of every faucet in town.

It was especially gratifying to hear how one neighbor of mine 'changed her tune' after going on that field trip with us. She used to be well known for complaining about anything related to the local water system (although she never attended the Association's meetings). She was so impressed by what she saw on the field trip, that not only has she stopped complaining about our water system, but she also has told several other complainers that they should keep their mouths shut until they know what they're talking about!

As part of our environmental education campaign, three years ago we decided that every year the Association would take the sixth-graders from the local elementary school on a field trip similar to the one described above. The kids always enjoy the trip and end up learning something about our community's water system. Our hope is that some of those kids, when they reach adult age, will take an interest in how their local water system is managed. Some of them will attend the annual Assembly meetings, and a few of those who attend the meetings will offer to serve on the Board of Directors. Those new volunteers will bring to the Association the energy and fresh ideas that every social organization needs to stay alive.