



**Constructing common ground and re-creating differences  
between professional and indigenous communities in the Andes**

Short title: Professional and indigenous communities

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## **Abstract**

Multi-actor initiatives aiming at environmental sustainability and social equity, face complex tensions between institutionalized decision-makers, backed up by expert knowledge, and communities with locally embedded knowledge and interests. Despite the importance given to community participation, successful experiences are limited in number, scope and duration. Experts are confronted with the paradox that they exclude local communities with the strategies and languages they use to include them.

This study is based on the long-term experiences of the authors with a multi-actor initiative in Southern Ecuador on sustainable rural drinking water management. They were involved as action-researchers, facilitating multiparty interactions and supporting reflective practice among the participants.

The article shows how multiparty processes construct identities, workforms, structures and activities that cross the boundaries between communities of expert and indigenous practice, even in the exceptionally unequal conditions of the Andes, where inequalities between these communities are deeply rooted in history. Such transitions were taken as opportunities to look for common ground between different communities-of-practice whilst, at the same time, contradictions could come to the fore. As inequalities tend to be confirmed through interactions, not only inside but also outside the multi-actor initiative, they cannot be resolved definitively by a multiparty project. Under those circumstances a social constructionist approach, calling the attention to the constructed nature of mutual perceptions and relationships, was highly inspiring for the authors-facilitators to keep the reflection and dialogue among the participants in the process going-on.

**Keywords:** Communities of practice; Community participation; Multiparty collaboration; Sustainable water management; Paradox.



## **Constructing differences between expert and indigenous communities in environmental management**

Since the nineties organizational scholars have drawn the attention to a new research agenda resulting from a globalizing context. There is a need to generate more collaborative work forms to deal with the increasing interdependence and diversity of interests and perspectives, which have to be taken into account simultaneously. (Cooperrider & Pasmore, 1991; Brown, 1991). There is also the expectation that the study of new collaborative forms of organizing can contribute to a conceptual and practical renewal of the organizational domain, by taking into account the paradigms and action strategies of the social actors and their interrelations that have been academically undervalued (Bilimoria et al., 1995), including NGO's (Bebbington, 1996; Van Dongen, 1997), global social movements (Castells, 1996; Caroll & Ratner, 1994; Johnson & Cooperrider, 1991) and indigenous communities (Bebbington & Ramon, 1992).

Especially in relation to the sustainable management of natural resources, there is a call for collaboration among a diversity of social actors to respond to the interdependencies in the ecological system. The UN Conference in Rio (1992) on sustainable development was only one milestone in an ongoing consciousness-raising about the intertwinedness of ecological sustainability and social participation (Fisher, 1993). However, critical scholars and social activists have been extremely sceptical concerning collaboration as a frame to address ecological issues. They fear that collaboration will not address adequately the unequal power distribution between the “weaker” local communities and the “stronger” professionalized organizations, like government agencies and business enterprises (Bebbington, 1992; Caroll & Ratner, 1994; Escobar, 1997; Ortiz, 1997). With our case study of a collaborative initiative for rural drinking water supply in a regional context



characterized by huge social inequalities and a fragile eco-system, we want to contribute to this debate concerning the tension between collaboration and inequalities, between expert driven initiatives and local communities' experiences.

Social studies have described extensively the deep social inequalities producing a social rupture in southern Ecuador, the context of this case, as in the Andes in general (Olien, 1973; Pauwels, 1983; Bebbington & Ramon, 1992). These studies describe the cities as centres that are populated by social actors holding economic and political power. The cities are the places where the professionals live and the institutions have their offices, from which they coordinate their development projects in the rural areas. Social studies have described the rural world outside the centres as marginal and peripheral. Although interconnections between both worlds are not denied in these studies, the mutual interrelations are predominantly characterized in terms of domination on the one side and distrust and exclusion on the other side (Vintimilla, 1993). Various dichotomies, like modernity and tradition, urban and rural, centre and periphery, cultured and popular expressions, progressive and conservative tendencies, appear as superimposed the one on the other, reinforcing each other and giving rise to the image of a “dual society” (Pauwels,1983).

However this binary view no longer gives a satisfying account of the situation in the Andes. Massive migrations from the countryside to the cities and abroad have brought the traditional rural world directly into the urban world (Carpio, 1992). Technological innovations, especially ICT, have also transformed the relations between formerly clearly separated worlds, although different social groups have different access to and make different uses of these technologies (Castells, 1996). There is also an evolution towards more political participation and self-organization of the rural communities, ascribed to the successful actions of the indigenous and other social movements (Bebbington & Ramon, 1992; Tamayo, 1996). Although the characteristics of a dual Andean



society can still be seen in our case context, current studies direct attention to the fragmentation of society, the hybridization of cultures, the multiplicity of identities and the crossing of boundaries between communities (Garcia Canclini, 1996; Gergen, K. 1991; Nederveen Pieterse, 2001). In such circumstances “communities-of-practice” are constantly in-the-making as a result of negotiation of meanings internally and with the external context (Wenger, 1998). Some, such as indigenous communities, may be primarily based on geographical proximity, family relations and/or ethnic identity while others, such as modern organizations, may be based on different kinds of professional expertise or a common organizational structure. As a consequence of interactions between these two types of communities or between members belonging to both kinds of communities, there is a hybridization in which people rely on frames that they assemble according to the circumstances, partly with indigenous and partly with modern-Western elements, to give meaning and act in their daily living. However, despite the intense crossing of boundaries between communities and the mixing up of diverse identities and cultural expressions, social inequality continues to be reconstructed in the Andes as in the rest of Latin America (Garcia Canclini, 1996; Nygren, 1999).

We will argue here that a social constructionist approach to multiparty collaboration can be a valuable approach to deal with tensions between converging efforts of professionally driven initiatives and diverging efforts to maintain and defend local communities, insofar as it addresses the inherently paradoxical character of such a process.

### **Multiparty collaboration and community participation as paradox**

The concept of paradox refers to the experience of contradictory but interrelated elements (emotions, identities, perspectives, frames). Each element in itself is experienced as evident or



logical, but their simultaneous presence seems irrational or absurd (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987; Quinn, 1988). To make sense of such contradictory, puzzling experiences people tend to apply simplifying heuristics, by reducing them to binary oppositions. A situation is experienced then as a dilemma, which means that one has to choose among two opposite alternatives that are conceived within the same frame. Such an analytical approach may help clarifying a situation, calling the attention to certain eventually unattended aspects and coming to action. There is nothing wrong with it as long as we remember that these distinctions are as much part of our observing as of the observed. However, as those bipolar distinctions tend to get easily reified, they risk blocking instead of supporting innovating action alternatives (Hosking & Morley, 1991; Lewis 2000).

Reflexivity concerning the constructed nature of our concepts may bring back the necessary complexity and interrelationship to a practice. Facing a situation as a paradox an actor accepts that different alternatives may be valid at the same time. A paradoxical view calls for creativity to address different alternatives simultaneously and “tap” their positive potential (Lewis, 2000)

Multiparty collaboration is such a concept that risks falling victim to dilemmatic thinking. It is defined by referring to a particular process of constructively exploring differences between actors (Gray, 1989), or by the variety of social actors participating in an initiative (Vansina, Taillieu & Schrujjer, 1996), or by the crossing of boundaries of one organization (Huxham, 1996). Despite this variety of definitions, its methodologies, influenced by Organizational Development (Cummings & Worley, 1993) tend to focus on “converging”, that means bringing different actors together and integrating frames in one perspective or solution. The underlying assumptions of these methodologies are that all actors work together around a shared issue “as if”:

- they all have equal or not very disparate power to influence the decision process



- although they may maintain different positions, their underlying interests are the same or at least reconcilable
- they all collaborate voluntarily.

Inequalities between the parties are considered as counterproductive for a collaborative process.

They are conceived as an aspect of the social context outside the initiative, and accordingly have to be addressed in the context before the initiative starts (Gray, 1989: 119-120).

Multiparty organizing however implies also a diverging tendency. By referring to an initiative as “multiparty” the attention is focused on the multiplicity of social actors to be involved in it and on the diversity of perspectives to frame their involvement. Involving multiple parties is justified in the literature by advantages in relation to the problem setting, for instance better taking into account the complexity of a problem, and in relation to the solution strategies, for instance creating commitment from different actors to support implementation (Huxham, 1996). But as different actors, frames and interests cannot be taken into account in the same degree or at the same moment, the acknowledgment of diversity may generate even more tensions. O’Connor (1996) observes that, as a consequence, actors in collaborative initiatives have contradictory espoused theories and theories-in-use concerning community participation.

The last decade we observe a growing interest of organizational scholars to address adequately issues of power and inequality in multiparty collaboration (Gray, 2000; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Himmelman, 1996; Sink, 1996; Taket & White, 1995; Van Dongen, 1996). According to Hardy & Phillips (1998) this implies analyzing:

- how different stakeholders, relying on personal and collective memory of parallel and previous interactions with each other in a broader social-historical context, create sense in the initiative under study,



- how the framing of the initiative by the different parties takes into account certain interests and includes certain actors while unavoidably excluding others.

As social actors rely on their political authority and technical expertise to initiate and convene multiparty initiatives, the risk of being excluded is especially high for local community actors. In the literature on social change, this tension is dealt with as a dichotomy between experts and laymen (Leeuwis, 2000), or between professionals and volunteers (Lagrou, 1998), or between public officers and social movement representatives (Huxham & Vangen, 1999), or between technocratic decision makers and local communities (Escobar, 1997; Nygren, 1999). In our case study we analyse paradoxical tensions as resulting from the interactions between different kinds of communities-of-practice (Wenger, 1998).

Critical social scientists like Bourdieu, Habermas, Foucault and Giddens have all warned of the dangers of a technocratic society and the exclusion of local communities (Flood & Romm, 1996; Nygren, 1999). A social constructionist approach questions the self-evidence of apparently objective knowledge that does not take into account the knowing actors by analyzing the relationship between knowledge production, types of discourse and social interests. A social constructionist approach to a multiparty initiative has then to pay attention to the discursive legitimacy of the frames used by the different actors. Different kinds of experiences, arguments and interests that different actors bring to the interaction are not equally accepted. Actors exert power because the authority of their arguments cannot be questioned or reflected upon in the interaction with other actors (Bakhtin, 1981): “it is scientifically proven that...”, “according to the law...”, “the funding agencies want that...”.





While a social-constructionist perspective of knowledge creation may help to clarify differences between communities-of-practice producing local knowledge on the one hand, and experts' knowledge on the other hand, it may also help to adjust this apparent dichotomy (Bouwen, 2004; Nygren, 1999; Wenger, 1998). In contrast to Geertz' conception of local knowledge (1984) as a relatively static body of ideas that are based on the direct experiences of an isolated group in a specific context, a social-constructionist perspective considers all knowledge as local, which is generated in meaningful interactions among the – geographically concentrated or dispersed – members belonging to a community-of-practice. The knowledge of local communities, also in the case of indigenous communities in the Andes, is enacted and changing in the interactions of its members not only among each other, but increasingly with a rapidly evolving environment. Scientific knowledge is also enacted in communities of research practice and in interactions with specific kinds of application contexts.

The following case description identifies mechanisms that help to deal with the paradox of community participation in multiparty initiatives. Our working hypothesis is that practices through which professional experts and local people cross the boundaries between their communities (through identities, structures, action strategies, symbols) contribute to deal with this paradox insofar as they allow the actors to explore and reflect on their common ground and differences simultaneously.

### **Enhancing the sustainability of rural drinking water supply.**



Due to geographical and historical circumstances drinking water supply on the Ecuadorian countryside depends mostly on small decentralized systems that are managed autonomously by the local communities (between 15 and 200 families generally). These systems have been built by public or non-governmental organizations, starting in the 60ties, but especially in the last two decades. The local communities in general participate in a limited way in the installation of their system by putting free manual work at the projects' disposal. However after completion of the infrastructure, they are generally left with the responsibility to maintain the drinking water service. Most of the time they lack technical, financial, administrative and organizational capacities to cope with this responsibility.

In the following account we report on a multiparty initiative to tackle the challenge of enhancing the sustainability of rural drinking water service in the Southern Andes of Ecuador. The first conversations leading to this initiative date back to the mid nineties; the initiative is still under way.

### ***Involvement of the researchers in the study***

Representatives of an international NGO specialized in water-related community projects participated in workshops on “multiparty collaboration”. These were organized by ACORDES, a research and consultancy centre at the State University of Cuenca to which the authors are linked by giving social process support to regional development initiatives. At these workshops professionals involved in various development projects reflected on and exchanged their multiparty experiences, based on the principles of Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983) and the concepts and frameworks of for instance Gray (1989), Bouwen & Fry (1991), and Wilson & Charlton (1997). The idea of setting up a multiparty collaboration for the joint management of a domain was received with a mixture of interest and scepticism by the participants, because of the obstacles they saw in the pronounced



social diversity of the local context. As a side effect of these workshops the previously mentioned NGO invited ACORDES to support the start up of a multiparty initiative in the drinking water domain, by conducting a “feasibility study”.

The authors considered this study as a unique opportunity for an action-research (Dick, 1999; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Selener, 1997) to learn with the parties involved in this initiative “from within” about multiparty processes in a turbulent context faced with high cultural diversity, social inequalities, environmental challenges and rapid societal changes. Over the years, the way we participated and intervened in the initiative varied according to the circumstances and the ad hoc contracts with the convener. Sometimes we participated just by observing multiparty interactions moments; but generally our participation was more active, like asking questions and systematically sounding stakeholders about their views on the initiative, designing and facilitating interaction moments, coaching the convener in his role, and feeding back observations and reflections to the different actors. Currently, more than seven years later, some of the authors are still involved in some offshoots of the process that we describe here.

The research team is internally heterogeneous, corresponding to the heterogeneity of the multi-actor group involved in the initiative under study. Some of the authors are Ecuadorians, others are Europeans with a long-term local residence, and still others are Europeans on study and consultation visits. Some have an academic background and others have a background in community work; some are maintaining intense contacts with NGO’s and others are more at home with public institutes and municipalities.

***Drinking water as a project component reuniting actors and interests in conflict***



The origin of the initiative under study is linked to an Integrated Rural Development Project in South Ecuador, funded by the International cooperation, to enhance agricultural productivity by building a huge dam for irrigation purposes. In this 16 million dollar project worked together some 75 professionals, mostly Ecuadorians, belonging to three different public institutions, international cooperation agencies and a national NGO. The escalating conflict between the supporters and the opponents of the dam, partly following and partly crossing the established ethnic, religious, political and socio-economic boundaries, paralyzed the project activities completely and, by the mid nineties, led to a reformulation of the project.

An external interdisciplinary expert commission, including sociologists who consulted the opinion of the leaders of the different factions of the regional indigenous movements, recommended including rural drinking water supply as a strategic component of the Rural Development project. According to the results of a Rapid Rural Appraisal in 1995, the majority of the communities (more than 200 in total) had a drinking water infrastructure, but only 15 % indicated receiving an “acceptable” water quantity and quality. The expert consultants identified rural drinking water supply as a strategic issue that could bring the conflicting parties again together. The consultants foresaw that the institutional actors in the project would gain legitimacy in the communities with the drinking water component, especially in those where they had been strongly rejected before.

The Rural Development project then invited an additional foreign NGO specialized in water-related activities and community organization, to strengthen the drinking water component. This new NGO took up a convening role for a broad interorganizational initiative. According to the NGO, and contrary to the prevailing public and non-governmental opinion in Ecuador, priority was not to be given to the construction of new infrastructure, but to the reparation, improvement and maintenance of the already existing infrastructure. Sustainability of the service was proclaimed by the NGO as



the first priority to be attended. No single organization was able to guarantee this sustainability on their own, argued the NGO representatives. This was contrary to what the other actors had believed thus far. The convener insisted on looking for complementarities in the capacities of different actors in relation to rural drinking water supply.

At that time, a national parliamentary debate was starting on the decentralization of the public administration. In the future probably municipalities would receive additional funds to comply with new responsibilities, for instance in relation to drinking water. The NGO wanted to take profit from this opportunity to bring representatives of the local governments and of the local communities around the table. The local municipal representatives that were contacted expressed their interest because they were ambitious to assume new functions, but they lacked precise ideas and experiences concerning these functions. Community leaders expressed caution and scepticism concerning a possible taking over of “their” water systems by the municipalities. They depicted local governments as paternalist and corrupt.

### *Exploring stakeholders and reflecting on the differences*

The convening NGO had the ambition to influence the quality of the rural drinking water supply on a regional and even on a national scale. Their representatives were aware that they could not realize their mission alone, but they did not know which actors had to be involved, in which way they could be involved, what they could eventually expect from each other, and which opportunities and obstacles had to be taken into account - according to each of the actors. Therefore the NGO asked ACORDES to execute a feasibility study for multiparty collaboration in rural drinking water service. The in-depth stakeholder analysis with which we started was not an external “objective” study of a multiparty domain, but turned out to be the start of and part of a long negotiation process.

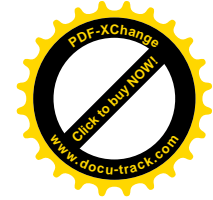


A first round of stakeholder questionnaires by undergraduate students was immediately followed by a second round of much more interactive conversations and focus groups, in each of which a limited number of actors participated, with the consultants triggering and stimulating their conversational construction of possible scenarios for joint drinking water activities.

The stakeholder-analysis, including the feedback of results we gave to all the actors through personal contacts, enhanced the awareness of a broadly shared concern related to the sustainability of rural drinking water supply and an interest to collaborate. The questioning also revealed the fragmentation of the rural drinking water domain and the mutual sensibilities and rivalries among the actors. Each actor presented images of the others in relation to his own interests and insights, and in ways that were not imagined or that were probably not acceptable for these others.

In our stakeholder analysis we identified a broad variety of social actors as linked to the rural drinking water domain. These included: NGO's (4 national Ecuadorian and 2 international); local governments (3 municipalities, 1 provincial council); 3 national and 1 regional public institutions (belonging to 3 different ministries); 1 multi-institutional regional development project; 3 international cooperation funding agencies; more than 200 traditional indigenous and rural communities ethnically identified as Indian or *mestizo* peasant (of which more than half participated in certain ways and moments); 3 regional and 5 more local indigenous umbrella organizations and 7 village councils.

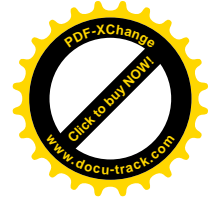
A number of important paradigms were in play, which we labelled as follows: technology transfer, economically self-sufficient communities, ecological sustainability, and functional complementarity between different actors. At first glance some of the involved actors could be characterized by a favourite paradigm: NGO members tended to stress community self-sufficiency or ecological



sustainability, representatives of public institutions tended to speak in terms of technological transfer; and the convening NGO tended to highlight functional complementarities between actors. Nevertheless, this identification of actors with a single paradigm is a risky simplification, as it denies the complex and dynamic nature of the frames that actors use and adapt in their interactions (Dewulf, Craps and Dercon, 2004), mixing them with elements of other frames.

The four paradigms mentioned above are all examples of professional discourses in the drinking water domain. They were relatively easy to identify based on what the representatives of different institutes explicitly expressed in conversations with us. In the discourses of the indigenous community members we found a mixture of the elements of different professional paradigms on which the community leaders seemed to draw in a strategic way in their conversations with us to safeguard whatever contribution of external professional actors, while stressing their own autonomy.

It is important to notice however that – contrary to the still dominant “dual” vision on the Andes society, we could not make a clear dichotomous distinction between urban-professional and local indigenous organizations. It is true that NGO’s, public institutions and cooperation agencies are highly professionalized, whereas the rural communities exemplify well what we understand under indigenous communities. But how to classify, for instance, indigenous umbrella organizations, local water councils or village councils? They are not so professionalized, but neither are they indigenous communities, although they may be strongly linked with those communities in which they find their “raison d’etre”. Or what to say about professional institutions that incorporate schooled members of indigenous communities? As we shall see later, in the course of the process the actors consciously took profit from, or created intentionally, even more blurred organizational realities to make the multiparty collaboration work.



### *A Common Vision Search Workshop*

The convening NGO invited all the actors that had been contacted during the previous phase to a starting event. The response was high. ACORDES designed and facilitated a two-day workshop to convene the multiparty group around a common vision, without losing out of sight the diverse interests and frames that emerged before (Weisbord, 1992; Weisbord & Janoff, 1995; Wilson & Charlton, 1997). Through the design and facilitation we took care to alternate diverging and converging interactions, by putting people in homogenous and heterogeneous subgroups, and by focusing the attention on common as well as on different interests. Converging was fostered by e.g.: stressing a “common vision” in the agenda, the opening discourse and as an end product of the workshop; by extensive formal and informal opportunities for direct face-to-face contacts in small mixed workgroups of representatives of different institutes and communities, and; by exercises like the shared reconstruction of their common history and interdependencies. Diverging was fostered by e.g.: highlighting the diversity among the participants confronting them with an overview of the main discrepancies in relation to the issue under consideration; by creating opportunities for participants to meet in relatively “homogeneous” workgroups (communities, local governments, public institutes, NGO’s) to reflect on their specificities, and to express their differences with the other stakeholders; by inviting a numerous delegation of indigenous community representatives, so that they could feel “stronger” towards the professionals of the other institutes.

The workshop resulted in a long, mid and short-term scenario for setting up a multiparty collaborative initiative for rural drinking water at the level of three municipalities. Commissions were formed with representatives of different institutes and community organizations, in order to work out an operational proposal including financial, technical and administrative issues.





### *An organization in-between indigenous communities and municipalities*

Although we were not directly involved as process consultants during this phase, we had the opportunity to converse with various commission members and we reflected with the convener on the function of these commissions. The convening NGO was conscious of its strong “leading” role to make the multi-actor commissions function: they made the invitations, prepared the agenda and drafted proposals to be discussed and wrote the reports. The convenor tried to mobilize and motivate people to participate actively in the commissions but recognized that especially community representatives participated only marginally.

The characteristics of these commissions as a work form turned out to be adapted to the interests and capacities of the professional experts but not to those of the peasants representing the indigenous communities. For the professionals, working in the commissions was their job; however the community leaders had to work on their fields to earn their living. Community leaders also found it difficult to intervene in the name of the communities or rural water users as they represented only their own isolated community. As the commission work progressed, the topics became more technically specialized, making it difficult for the community leaders with little formal schooling to understand the relevance of the discussions for their local conditions. Finally, for the community leaders drinking water was an important issue but just one among many other community concerns to be addressed, whereas for the professionals – especially for those being part of the convener – the commissions were their central concern at the time. The commissions thus became a forum where different professionals learned to clarify and deal with each other’s interests and stakes. In the relative absence of the communities the convening NGO took over the role of defending their interests, speaking in the name of the communities.



The NGO maintained intense bilateral contacts with the different parties. In a growing number of communities it renewed the drinking water systems together with the local habitants. Each local project was an opportunity to discuss and reflect with the community people on the necessary conditions to sustain the service, and to promote the idea of a service centre, managed by a multi-actor organization. The NGO also started joint drinking water projects with the municipalities as direct counterparts to improve together downgraded rural as well as urban systems. Leaving behind its former “pure” option to work directly with and exclusively for marginalized rural communities, the NGO came to know better the municipal actors.

The convening NGO complained about the lack of competence and motivation in the communities as well as in the municipalities. At the same time we noticed growing trust, credibility and expectations in the communities and in the municipalities towards this NGO. The convener increasingly monopolized a third party position in-between polarized municipality and community positions. It became harder for the other non-governmental and public institutes to identify their contribution. As a consequence their participation in the multiparty activities diminished, strengthening even more the central position of the NGO and the dependence of the local actors on it.

The reflections we had with the representatives of the convening NGO revealed that at times they felt psychologically torn by the contradictory expectations concerning their role in the multiparty initiative. On the one hand, they considered themselves self-confidently as leaders of the initiative, especially in the beginning. “We were the only one that had reflected seriously on the question of the sustainability in the drinking water domain” they said to us in an evaluating conversation concerning their role. They relied on their experience, resources and prestige as a foreign funded



organization to lead the initiative. But gradually they became aware that such a leading function contradicted their intention to reach shared insights and decisions. For example, as the NGO representative entrusted to us: “Before, we arrived somewhere with our project. We had established unilaterally the objectives, the strategies and the resources, which meant that we had the project under control. But what I’ve learned in this initiative is that with an interorganizational collaboration there is not anything that can be fixed or decided unilaterally, *not even the objectives* (sic). I have the impression that I had to be able this time to put even the most fundamental principles, with which I started this project, on the discussion table”.

#### *A legal charter for the multiparty initiative*

The convener ascribed the weak involvement of the other counterparts to a lack of legal clarity of the multiparty collaboration and therefore invited all interested parties to a judicial workshop to resolve it. All formal organizations, including public organizations, local governments and NGO’s, require a legal-juridical framework in order to mobilize the necessary resources. However most indigenous communities and rural drinking water councils are only “de facto” organizations without legal titles and therefore official organizations could not sign legally binding agreements with them. Moreover communities often do not have proprietary titles of their drinking water systems. And Ecuadorian law did not provide a legal structure that allowed integrating different types of organizations such as communities and municipalities.

In this workshop, two lawyers presented a possible solution to these questions as a choice between two mutually excluding alternatives: a “municipal enterprise”, or a “cooperative of communities”. Each lawyer defended one of the alternatives. The community representatives supported the cooperative proposal as they saw it in line with their idea of community authority over the water



supply, while municipal representatives supported the municipal enterprise proposal as this made possible a direct control of the municipality over the rural water supply. The dichotomous choice of the lawyers induced a struggle for control over the domain. The representatives of the convening NGO pleaded for continuing the search for a legal and organizational structure that would safeguard what they emphasized as the core characteristic of the initiative, that is: being shared by multiple types of social actors. They suggested the legal concept of a “consortium”, without knowing its precise requirements. But the idea seemed to please most participants as a way out of the dilemma. They agreed to explore the possibility of adapting the existing charter for consortia to their specific interests.

A lot of creativity and lobbying by the convening NGO was needed to forge a consortium charter adapted to the local multiparty initiative, out of the existing laws and rules of different ministries and state departments. This charter foresaw a structure with an equal number of community and municipal representatives as permanent members with decision power, and with a free number of representatives of other kinds of organizations as temporary supporting members with consultative functions. The consortium charter constituted a formal opportunity to assemble two traditionally opposed actors - communities and municipality. It obliged them to meet on a regular basis, acknowledging each other as having a legitimate stake in a shared domain.

Despite the converging intention of the charter it also froze a division of the domain between actors that are treated as specialized and mutually exclusive categories: the communities as water system owners and users, the municipalities as supervisors and planners, and the others institutions as technical supporters. Moreover a consortium charter emphasizes the temporary characteristic of the union and the autonomy that the different parties retain.



As a consequence of the legalization of the initiative community actors were obliged to get a legal status to participate in it. They had to reflect in and among communities on the advantages and disadvantages of such a legal status, and on the question of participating as separate communities, or jointly through existing indigenous umbrella organizations, or through community umbrella organizations specifically created for this purpose. Different communities gave different answers to this question according to the circumstances in different places of the region, and according to the opinions of indigenous leaders and the negotiations among communities. These debates in and among communities stimulated the appropriation of the initiative by the communities.

#### *Multiple memberships of indigenous councillors*

As a result of the municipal elections taking place at that time there was a significant increase in the number of municipal councillors with an indigenous identity, representing explicitly the rural communities. In one of the municipalities there was even an indigenous mayor and a majority of indigenous councillors - an unprecedented situation in the regional history. These councillors generally had a favourable attitude towards the multiparty collaborative initiative for rural drinking water as they saw it in line with their political vision of local governments supporting the living conditions in the communities. As a result of their double membership (Wenger, 1998) these councillors simultaneously identified with the indigenous communities and with the municipalities and played a significant bridging role between both. They visited the communities together with representatives of the convener and of other institutes to inform and to promote the multiparty initiative. Their presence and arguments convinced community people of the value of the initiative. They did not solve the existing rivalries among different factions of communities. Some communities decided to take part in the initiative as a result of the support of the councillors, but others, belonging to different factions, for the same reason preferred sometimes to stay out of it.



### *Service Centres as meeting places*

Since the first multiparty meeting all the participating actors had agreed on the necessity for a number of activities to support the sustainability of the rural drinking water provision. Only after almost six years was the first “Service Centre” put into practice carrying out supporting activities for a cluster of 25 communities and managed by a multiparty consortium. Various other centres in four different municipalities are still in the making. In the past the convening NGO has been carrying out some of the activities foreseen for the multiparty centres. Community people were actively involved in these activities, developing together technical and administrative capacities that they later passed on to the multiparty Service Centres.

The Service Centre has a flexible task package, which has to be defined and adapted by the local multiparty structure, according to the necessities, opportunities and negotiations. The convening NGO tended to insist on starting with a limited agenda of operational services like: technical support and monitoring of water systems; supply of spare parts; administrative, technical and organizational capacity building, etc. To respond to the expectations of their constituencies, but also to reach more integrated solutions by including other institutional actors with other paradigms and capacities, the centres tended to assume also other water-related activities such as: strategic sectoral and intercommunity planning, environmental and health education, protection of water wells, river catchment management, emergency interventions and fund-raising for expanding existing infrastructure.

The Service Centre is not just a virtual place; it refers to a real building and infrastructure. All the parties have agreed to install it preferably in a place outside the municipality building, to symbolize its relative autonomy from the municipality. It is a place where people from the communities arrive



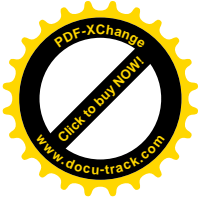
in search of spare parts or advice to resolve problems with their water system. The personnel of the Service Centres are from their own communities. In the past community people had to go for these services to the only big city in the region, a bus drive of at least a couple of hours to a place where – according to their accounts - they felt abused by the merchants attending them.

### **Creating differences by constructing common ground**

To respond to the increasing complexity of the problems related to the management of natural resources our society depends ever more on professional and technical expertise. This poses serious challenges related to the ways local communities can be involved in the solution of those problems in which they are the first and most affected actors.

In the following review of our case study account we highlight how shared practices between expert and indigenous communities were opportunities to deal with the contradictory tensions resulting from the involvement of both kinds of actors. Participating in a joint practice to which professional and community actors can connect in a different but meaningful way, may allow bridging the differences partly and for a while. However these practices create their own boundaries separating participants and non-participants, with the possibility of new exclusions.

- *The intentional active involvement of the researchers* through action-research stimulating reflective practice among the participants favoured the joint construction of locally validated knowledge concerning multiparty collaboration for rural drinking water management. However as a consequence of the much more intensive involvement of some professionals of the convener NGO and of the research team, other actors, especially community leaders, gradually became excluded from this learning process.



- *Exploring with the stakeholders their differences and common ground*, rather than a diagnosis of an existing situation, turned out to set in motion the multiparty situation, by enhancing the awareness of their differences as well as their will to collaborate. But once this stakeholder analysis got reduced to a written report used by the convening NGO to raise funds for the multiparty initiative it lost its mobilizing effect.
- *A common vision search workshop* was set up by the researchers-facilitators as a temporal “bridging” moment between the parties. This alternated and integrated in one large encounter moments that focussed the attention on, for example, different and common interests, technical and relational aspects, short term and long term, etc. It allowed the joint construction of a “common vision” amongst the participants concerning the multiparty domain. However, especially for the indigenous representatives, participation in such a workshop is not the kind of practice in which they feel strongly engaged, and as a consequence they did not identify much with the resulting vision.
- *An in-between organization*, like the convening NGO, could hold the multiparty domain together during a long time, by mediating between the indigenous communities, municipalities, public institutes... This was thanks to its mixture of professional technical expertise and strong social community engagement. However, the way the NGO functioned as a third party, preferably dealing in separate opportunities with the municipalities, other institutions and isolated communities, reinforced the fragmentation of the domain and the dependency of the communities from the NGO to relate with the other actors.
- *Looking together for an adequate legal charter* helped to connect different kinds of organizations, communities and municipalities into a mixed organizational structure. However only the NGO representatives and some legal specialists involved in the lobbying activities were aware of, and promoting, the unique features of a communities-municipality





consortium for the drinking water and for the public services domain in general in Ecuador.

The majority of the community leaders saw just a reified structure, through which they had to defend the interests of their constituencies in front of the other as an opponent.

- *The double membership* of the indigenous municipal councillors, pertaining simultaneously to the indigenous communities and to the professionalized institutes, contributed to the appropriation of the multiparty initiative by the communities and by the municipality. Comments by other municipal councillors and by indigenous leaders revealed the risk for these indigenous councillors of not being taken seriously by the communities or by the municipality. For the other mestizo councillors the indigenous councillors were just interested in the particular interests of their (faction of) indigenous communities. The rural people saw these leaders that passed whole days in meetings at the municipality and other institutions as alienated from their community life.
- *The Service Centres* in the village centres function as meeting places where different kinds of experiences and knowledge related to rural drinking water provision can be exchanged. But the main concern expressed by the convening NGO is if the people from the municipalities and other institutes also consider these centres as theirs and will continue supporting them. Then these centres will be a meeting place - not only for the people from the communities - but also with enough professional expertise to offer the solutions for rural drinking water supply that make them attractive for the indigenous people.

As we can observe, each of the practices to deal with the differences between the indigenous communities and the other parties, kept the initiative on-going without however “resolving” definitely the tensions of the multiparty domain. They give the involved actors an opportunity to work together on joined outcomes. But as the professionalized actors have more convening power to initiate joint activities, as the result of their position in a broader societal and historical context,



they unavoidably use their own paradigms to frame the issues, for instance as a problem to be resolved by specific sophisticated work forms, legal forms, institutional memberships or technologies, with which they are more acquainted than the indigenous community members. As a consequence the outcomes risk being more appropriated by the professional actors than by the communities, generating new divisions. Professional actors in multiparty initiatives with local communities thus face a permanent challenge to act and reflect on the paradox of the divisions and exclusions resulting from the language and the practices they use to include.

### **Acknowledgements**

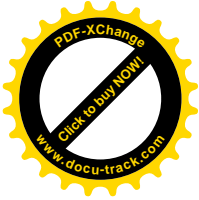
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