



Water — and more — for the barrios of Tegucigalpa

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By 2000, all Tegucigalpa's legalized peri-urban communities should have their own water system installed and functioning — ten years ago they had nothing. How have women been the catalysts?

1. Today we know that the estimates made in 1986 were quite conservative. In addition, there are realistic estimates that 30 to 40 per cent of the water that enters the system never reaches its destination because of leakage in the pipes. Even though Tegucigalpa's water-source capacity has doubled since 1986, this is still not sufficient to provide everyone with house connections.

Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, is situated in a valley surrounded by steep mountains. Since the early 1970s, people from all over the country have migrated to settle in the urban areas and formed *barrios marginales* — marginal or peri-urban communities. The uncontrolled settlements worsened existing problems, with access to basic social services lagging severely behind. In 1973, Tegucigalpa's total population stood at around 300 000; today that figure has almost tripled, of whom over 400 000 live in the *barrios*.

The Tegucigalpa project

Doña Mercia Munguia, in her early forties, lives with five relatives in a wooden two-room house on the city outskirts. From her home you can view the whole city, and see how it continues to grow, climbing along the steep hillsides further and further towards the mountaintops. Mercia was not born in the capital; like many others she moved from the countryside in search of a better life for herself and her children.

'I started constructing this house 11 years ago. Last August, a tap standpost with water was connected in the yard', she says proudly. 'When, a couple of years ago, I first heard about the programme that was supposed to provide water to communities like ours, I didn't believe it was true. I had a hard time convincing my neighbours', she recalls. How would it be possible to provide their houses with piped water when commercial water trucks were unable or unwilling to climb the narrow streets? The sceptics did not believe anybody would help them. Nevertheless, the rumours spread and people started to organize themselves. Mercia is now the president of the water committee in her community, and already a veteran in health and hygiene promotion.

In the early 1980s, most of the peri-

urban communities in Tegucigalpa lacked access to a drinking-water source — a family could spend as much as a third of its income on water from a vendor. In 1986, studies indicated that the available potable water sources were insufficient for the rapidly growing peri-urban population. Plans to open a new source were developed and financing for the expansion of the main network was sought.¹ Faced with the overall water shortage and realizing that it would not be possible to provide an increasing number of city-dwellers with tap-water from the regular system in the short run, another solution had to be found. It was estimated at the time that families in the *barrios marginales* were paying private vendors up to US\$13 million per year. If just a proportion of that money could be diverted, lower-cost and non-conventional water systems could be constructed — paying for themselves within a few years.

To alleviate the pressing problems, Unicef and the National Water Board, SANAA, developed a programme for peri-urban areas which got underway in 1987. The Government agreed to create a special body for peri-urban water provision, the Executive Unit for Settlements in Development (UEBD). Today, UEBD is a permanent part of SANAA and unique in Latin America.

The resulting safe, potable water comes from two sources: boreholes — from which groundwater is abstracted, and surface water which is treated by SANAA. Groundwater is pumped untreated to the community with an electric pump — sometimes an expensive option as electricity costs have spiralled in recent years. Treated water is distributed both through the conventional network, and by water trucks to public standposts or in-house connections.

Community water-pipe construction.



'The community will become the owner of the water system ... responsible for collecting fees, administration, and operation and management'

Community action

When they settled in the peri-urban communities, people were strangers to each other. They came from different parts of the country and had varying local traditions and habits; simply surviving from day to day in an alien environment was enough of a challenge. But, realizing that social services would not come to them, the communities started to organize.

Water services are always considered one of the first priorities, the initiative and driving force behind this demand generally coming from women, the ones most in need of those services. Under the terms of the Unicef/SANAA programme, the community became eligible for a water project by setting up an independent water committee. This committee — which could be elected by communities as tiny as 36 households or as large as 30 000 inhabitants — will then run and manage its own water system, through the construction process and beyond. The community will eventually become the owner of the whole water system, and be responsible for collecting fees, administration, and operation and maintenance.

The Water Board contracts a plumber and an administrator; in the smaller communities, only the plumber gets paid. Around four times a year the UEBD organizes a plumbing workshop with participants selected by the water committees: around half are women. Within the water boards, women fill approximately one third of the positions. Sixty-two per cent of those women hold

positions as committee president or financial controller.

Cost recovery

In 1998, each household is paying around 350lps (\$27) to join the water scheme. This covers the purchase of materials such as sand and gravel, and tools. In addition, every family agrees to provide manual labour for the construction work. Once the water system is operating, they contribute between 25 and 40lps (\$2-3.50) a month. Part of the fee is secured in a revolving fund managed by SANAA, which goes towards programme expansion and high-cost system repairs. The community's contribution amounts to approximately 40 per cent of the total cost of the water system; SANAA contributes 25 per cent, and Unicef covers the rest through donor contributions from the Swedish Government. Through additional public and private donations and other donor partnerships, the construction of water systems has progressed quicker than expected; by 2000, all Tegucigalpa's legalized peri-urban communities should have their own water system installed and functioning.

Hygiene education

Since 1996, hygiene education within the programme has intensified. According to the health authorities in Tegucigalpa, diarrhoeal diseases are *the* major health problem in the *barrios*. Other diseases common in poor urban areas are acute respiratory infections, intestinal parasites, and malnutrition. Knowing that the health benefits of a clean-water supply depend entirely on sound everyday water-use and sanitation practices, hygiene education, information and training are now at the core of the programme.

Today there are more than 160 voluntary family visitors within the programme, with many more being trained over the next two years. All recruited from the community, they receive training in hygiene education and sanitation. The majority are women; men account for only 12 per cent. Each family visitor 'looks after' 8 to 12 households — talking to them about sanitation and hygiene behaviour; a daunting task in a community where crime is rocketing and where you would not open the door to a stranger. Slowly, and with the help of the organization built around the water

Gaining clean water is just the first step — the *barrio* committees and family visitors are fighting for schools, clinics, electricity, improved roads, and much more.



gender and water

programmes, trust is building up and, although some doors remain closed, as neighbours, the women are far more likely to get a warm reception.

In around 80 per cent of the houses visited, there has been a significant change in sanitation and hygiene behaviour. According to the owner of a *pulperia* (a small neighbourhood shop) in Mercia's community, families who kept their doors shut still suffer from diarrhoea, and spend money on medicines. He cares about his business but, as his wife is a voluntary family visitor, he understands that a healthy community is more important. His children are also helping out — UEBD is supporting teachers and local schools in a personal and domestic hygiene-education initiative.

Keeping up the good work

Mercia became a health volunteer in her village many, many years ago; an entire wall in her house is covered with framed diplomas and awards. She is justifiably proud of her skills and knowledge, and of the respect she commands in her community. Now she hopes her 21-year-old daughter, Laura, will become a healthy-neighbourhood promoter; they already work together as voluntary family visitors.

Why do these women take on this unpaid workload? 'Projects come and go but volunteers need not be forgotten, though they need esteem and appreciation to carry on', Mercia points out. As co-ordinator for a group of 13 volunteers, she knows that being appreciated and given responsibility are as important as money. Equally important are the opportunities to build on training and progress to professional work. The women are proud of the progress made within their own communities in reducing diarrhoea and other water-related diseases. Being able to report on reduced incidence rates to neighbours and programme partners is a great bonus. It is very important, therefore, to involve the community in monitoring activities — both to follow up progress, and to give credit where credit is due.

Clean water — life changes

As we write, more than 150 000 people living in 95 of Tegucigalpa's *barrios* have already benefited from the water-supply programme. An overwhelming part of that success must be attributed to women like

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