



# Institutional support for community-managed rural WSS in Latin America

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**Reform to the WSS sector in Latin America has largely ignored rural systems, and there has been little technical support for rural systems once they are set up. This article describes four examples of successful back-up support for rural WSS systems in Nicaragua and Honduras.**

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The generally poor performance of the water supply and sanitation (WSS) sector has prompted many Latin American countries to initiate reform efforts. Although many countries have recognized the inadequacies of centralized service provision, real change is just beginning to occur. Some countries are turning to the private sector for improved service provision; others are considering increased decentralization to municipalities as the primary basis of reform. In general, however, reform efforts have focused primarily on urban areas and have largely neglected impact on rural areas.

In particular, relatively few countries have an adequate institutional framework for rural water supply and sanitation. Often institutions have overlapping responsibilities, lack trained personnel to work effectively in rural areas, lack access to financing for new

Although there is broad acceptance in Latin America of community management as the basic approach for operating and maintaining rural water supply systems, there is less understanding of the range of institutional options for rural systems and in particular for providing back-up support to the communities after the systems are operational. National rural water supply entities (e.g. departments within the national water agency or within the ministry of health) have generally proved to be ineffective in providing such support. Rural systems face a variety of technical, financial and management problems from time to time, and while some communities have the capacity to address these issues without outside assistance, most do not and require some limited but dependable assistance. EHP identified four successful examples of such back-up assistance in Central America.

promoter. In Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America, in rural areas the municipality is akin to a county in the USA and consists of an urban centre and the surrounding rural communities.

The municipal promoter is responsible for providing technical support to the rural communities within the municipality for complex repair or maintenance, reviewing finances, sampling water quality, providing training, resolving conflicts and monitoring overall system performance. As of 2000, nine

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## **The mobile technicians are now a national service covering over 2 million people in rural Honduras**

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promoters had been established in nine municipalities providing services to 55 per cent of the population. After two years of operation, the results have been encouraging. Monitoring reports indicate that the current status of the 300 water supply systems covered by the promoters is rated acceptable or above average in 95 per cent of cases. The model has succeeded in creating a locally based capacity in rural WSS that has maintained widely accepted levels of service provision.

Table 1 shows the division of responsibilities between the community water committees and the outside support mechanism in the form of the municipal promoter and regional promoter.

## **SANAA, Honduras**

This model is based on the circuit rider concept used in the USA by the

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## **Generally there is a lack of back-up support to communities after systems are constructed**

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systems, have inappropriate standards and have no mechanism for providing back-up support to communities after systems are constructed. It is this last issue of back-up support that is the subject of this article. With support from the Latin America and Caribbean Bureau in the U.S. Agency for International Development in 2000, the Environmental Health Project (EHP) identified and documented the examples summarized in this article of successful models for providing back-up support to rural communities.<sup>1</sup>

## **Region VI, Nicaragua**

Region VI covers the departments of Matagalpa and Jinotega, with a combined rural population of 540 000. Rural water supply coverage in the region is 35 per cent of the rural population and sanitation coverage is 36 per cent. The model for providing back-up support builds on the existing structure of community water committees and regional promoters of the National Water Supply and Sanitation Company (ENACAL) and adds a key link at the local level in the form of a municipal promoter. The municipal promoter is an employee of the municipal government, but works under the technical supervision of the regional ENACAL

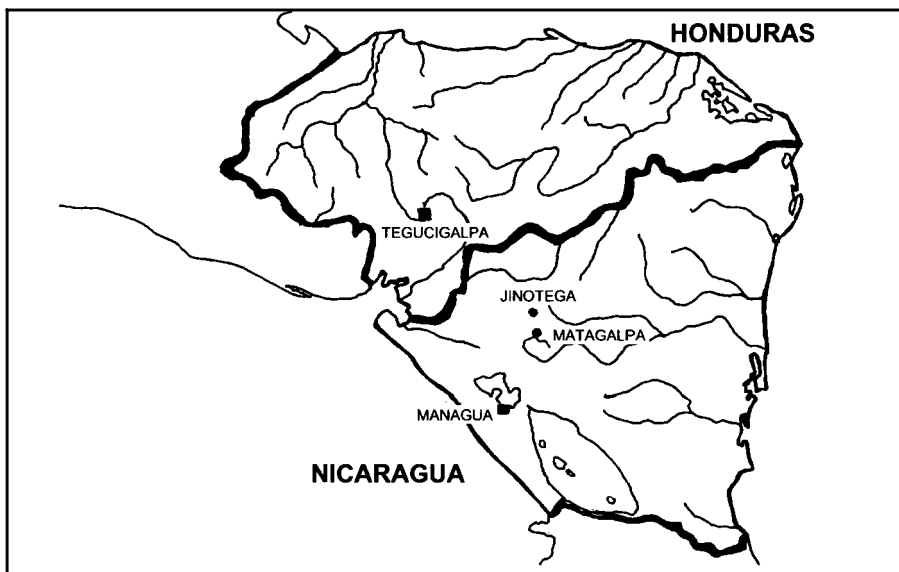


Figure 1 Well supported WSS systems exist in both Honduras and Nicaragua

National Rural Water Association and called TOM (technician in operation and maintenance) in Honduras. With support from the U.S. Agency for International Development, SANAA (National Water Supply and Sewerage Company) launched a pilot programme in 1993 in the Department of Atlantida. Based on its success, the programme was extended to the national level in 1995 and is now truly national in scope, covering 4023 community water supply systems and serving over two million people. The TOM is a mobile technician who provides support to a set number of communities and visits them regularly. TOMs are employees of SANAA and work for regional offices that have substantial authority to make decisions. Currently, 86 TOMs operate out of six regional offices of SANAA. Despite the effects of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the performance of the programme has made good progress.

Table 2 shows the monitoring system used by the TOM programme to determine its operational status and classification. This system helps to prioritize the TOMs' work by pointing out which communities need assistance. As of 2000, 15 per cent were classified Category A, 44 per cent in Category B, 31 per cent in Category C and 10 per cent in Category D.

**PROSAR and AHJASA, Honduras**

Honduras has two other models that provide back-up support for rural water

supply systems on a regional basis. PROSAR (Rural Water and Sanitation Project) is managed jointly by the Ministry of Health and the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation. Under PROSAR, 'Technicians in environmental health' are based in health centres in municipalities and are responsible for co-ordinating the construction of new projects, conducting training and providing back-up support to communities with existing systems. These technicians typically manage five new projects annually and provide back-up support to 25 communities. Four area co-ordinators supervise them. PROSAR

operates in 905 communities in two departments.

AHJASA (Honduran Water Board Association) was established by the International Rural Water Association (IRWA) and Agua Para el Pueblo, a Honduran NGO. AHJASA is an association of community water boards that offers training and technical and management advice to its members. AHJASA also acts as a forum for communities to offer assistance to one another, a unique feature of this programme. In this model, circuit riders paid by AHJASA provide support to communities that are members of the association. Unlike the other models discussed in this article, AHJASA does not have a set schedule of communities to visit each month and relies more on specific requests from communities. This model operates in six departments and serves 300 communities. AHJASA operates with only four circuit riders, one co-ordinator and one administrator/secretary. AHJASA is the only model discussed in this article that requires the communities to pay for services. However, user fees cover only 10 per cent of the total cost of AHJASA. The rest is paid for by the IRWA and Agua Para el Pueblo.

**Lessons learned**

These case studies demonstrate the following:

Table 1 Division of responsibilities between community-based and outside agents in Nicaragua

Level	Key tasks
Community water committee	Weekly O&M tasks include cleaning, regular maintenance, disinfection, system repair. Tariff collection and bookkeeping. Organizing regular and community committee meetings. Hygiene promotion among individual households. Watershed (catchment) protection.
Municipal promoter	Regular visits to communities. Technical back-up for emergencies. Periodic review of bookkeeping. Water-quality monitoring. Conflict resolution and support in reconstituting water committees. Ongoing training and orientation for committee members. Data collection and monitoring of performance. Key interlocutor with external agencies.
Regional promoter	Ongoing training and monitoring visits of municipal promoters. Visits to towns for discussions at municipal level. Collection and analysis of monitoring data. Liaison with key line ministries at municipal and regional levels.

Table 2 Monitoring rural water systems in Honduras

Category	Description	Action
A	All the physical components of the system are working well. The water board meets regularly. Tariffs are fixed, adequate and collected. The water supply is being chlorinated and water-quality standards are met. There is continuous or regular service.	Motivate the water board to continue the good work.
B	The system may or may not be functioning. There are operational problems that can be resolved without major investment. With minimal effort on the part of the TOM, the system can be moved up to 'A' category.	Work together with the water board to resolve the minor problems in administration, operation and maintenance.
C	The system may or may not be functioning. There are operational problems and there may be technical problems with the water supply. Moving the system up to 'A' category could require certain investments that are within the economic capacity of the community.	Work together with the water board to resolve the minor operational problems. Advise the board on the necessary system improvements and their cost, in order for the community to raise the required capital.
D	The system is not functioning. There are many problems. Moving the system up to 'A' category requires substantial investment, probably greater than the economic capacity of the community.	Report the situation to the regional SANAA office. There is little that can be done by the TOM.

While environmental awareness is more apparent than 10 years ago, very little attention is actually given. As in the case of sanitation and hygiene, promoters would benefit from more training in environmental issues and additional incentives. Technology plays an important role in determining the shape of the institutional support mechanism. In both Honduras and Nicaragua, the technologies used were very simple to maintain – gravity-fed systems and rope pumps. It is not clear how well the models presented above would work if the physical conditions required more complex and harder-to-maintain technologies, such as diesel and electrically powered pumps required for deep wells. One consequence might be the need for more highly trained technicians for more complex repairs.

It is unlikely in the foreseeable future that municipalities will be able to take the lead in providing back-up support to their rural communities. However, the Nicaragua and PROSAR case studies demonstrate that municipalities can play an important role.

These case studies do not advocate a particular model; rather they illustrate what can be achieved when proper support is provided to rural communities. While these examples are all from Central America, many of the lessons learned should be applicable to other regions, providing that rural communities have the primary responsibility for managing their systems. Experimentation is occurring and valuable lessons have been learned that can be of benefit to other countries.

## Reference

- 1 The full case studies are available from the EHP website ([www.ehproject.org](http://www.ehproject.org)).

## About the author

Fred Rosensweig is the Institutional Development Specialist for the USAID-funded Environmental Health Project. He has worked extensively on institutional and policy issues in water supply and sanitation in Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

A reliable source of funding for the programme infrastructure is fundamental to setting up an institutional support mechanism. In all of the examples, the infrastructure for providing back-up services was

### **In all cases, back-up services were paid for primarily by donors. Eventually this will have to change**

paid for primarily by external donor sources. Costs such as training, promoter salaries and support costs, logistic support and maintenance of an information system must be paid for. Since donor support is not reliable over time, either central government resources or user fees must be able to cover these costs within a reasonable timeframe.

The support system must be clearly defined at all levels. This includes: the ratio of promoters to communities, the number of visits per year,

the training required, reporting requirements and roles and responsibilities.

A workable information system must be established that provides the data promoters can use to target their efforts.

Health remains a secondary concern compared to technical and management matters. Although sanitation and hygiene are nominally included in most programmes, in reality they are not given much attention.

Promoters need additional training in sanitation and hygiene, increased co-ordination with health promoters, and incentives to increase their attention to this issue. Incentives might include making it a more prominent part of the job description, close monitoring by the promoters' supervisors, and the development of indicators to report on progress.

Environmental concerns are given even lower importance than health.