

Mexico's Native Communities Reverse the Flow of Accountability

They carried bows and arrows as symbols of their indigenous identity. Dozens stormed the Yuribia Dam, tied up the security guard and shut off the taps, cutting off the city below from its main source of water. State officials came personally to negotiate, arriving in luxury sedans with tinted windows, accompanied by an armed escort. Just one man – a local elite, a *mestizo* of mixed race – spoke on behalf of the indigenous communities to reach a settlement. As agreed, the men relinquished the dam, but the promises for new roads and better schools were never delivered.

Over ten years later, representatives from the various communities near the dam sat in a meeting with state and city officials. They praised the virtues of cooperation, smiled and joked. State officials complimented the local authorities on their thorough assessment of the environmental conditions in the watershed and announced the creation of a fund of 29 million pesos (£1.3 million) to be spent by the village collectives, under supervision of a watershed committee, for environmental restorations that would benefit local livelihoods and ensure continued supply of water to the city below.

What had changed in the intervening decade? The reconfiguration of power relations in southern Veracruz, Mexico came about partly as a result of a research project supported by the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability and conducted by the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a non-governmental organisation, Decotux. The work was undertaken in the action-research tradition that considers the act of seeking change as a legitimate form of investigation. It has catalysed a shift from the patronage system that once benefited urban interests and local elites to a new, mutual understanding among actors that gives indigenous communities new resources and new responsibilities.

The case study demonstrates that building accountability and co-responsibility between numerous actors with diverse and contradictory interests requires an ongoing process of negotiation and engagement through both formal and informal channels. Here, accountability is not created by decree, by a right-to-information law or by inviting all stakeholders to a meeting; it grows, gradually, from a process that builds solidarity among indigenous communities and allows them to be recognised collectively.

In this together

In the hills of Southern Veracruz, Mexico, water seeps from natural springs and drips from the leaves of the rain forest's lush vegetation to form the Huazuntlán and Tezizapa streams. The streams flow past rows of corn on fields as steep as stadium seats, past patches of barren, smouldering land, past women and their buckets, through the legs of drinking cattle, until they converge at a dam. There, the water is filtered and chlorinated and diverted by a concrete channel, which splits at the base of the mountain, sending some of the water 60 kilometres to the leaking pipes of the city, and ultimately to shops and homes, and the rest to the steaming petrochemical factories and refineries that dominate this stretch of coast on the Gulf of Mexico.

Water connects everyone in Southern Veracruz, but not harmoniously. All the actors are also connected by the consequences of the persistent degradation of the basin; deforestation and erosion are contributing to a decline in water flows and quality. All stand to lose from the current situation, though few spaces exist for cooperation in mutual interest.

At the local level, each cooperative farm, village and municipality has its own assembly, but these spaces are often rife with conflict sown by the uneven privatisation of land, competition for state resources, immigration, religion and party politics.

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Interaction between local institutions and federal and state government concerning water and natural resources are regulated by a legal framework that pays lip-service to participation but leaves no room for a negotiated settlement. The inhabitants of regions where the water supply originates are largely excluded from discussions, and when invited are often forced to endure the hostile and prejudiced attitudes of officials.

The obstacles to accountability here relate to the difficulty of enforcing existing laws and procedures designed to create a better planned system. Local institutions lack information about their entitlements within this legal framework and higher authorities lack the political will to integrate indigenous people in the existing participation spaces. There is no recipe for creating accountability. Power inequalities need to be confronted and new cultures of accountability nurtured.

From conflict to co-responsibility

Week after week during three years of participatory research, researchers acted as an honest broker between village leaders, informed them about the politics of water management in the region and facilitated a series of community-led environmental studies. This process gradually allowed village leaders to articulate their opinions without having to rely on municipal representatives who had for years served only their own personal interest.

Meanwhile, researchers met with local and state officials to advocate for new institutional arrangements over the long term, encouraging authorities to value the 'hydro-environmental services' provided by the farming communities – the practices and activities that contribute to watershed conservation and hence to protecting the water supply.

This work created an opportunity for change when a natural catastrophe required a rapid response. After torrential rainfall caused hundreds of landslides that damaged the dam, village leaders quickly assembled a recovery plan. Though still reluctant to cooperate with indigenous leaders, state authorities had nowhere else to turn.

Now there are mechanisms that may lead to greater accountability and sustainable management of the watershed. These include:

- a shift toward increased dialogue between communities and urban and political institutions, although this does not exclude the possibility of social mobilisations;
- the creation of a watershed committee involving the local authorities of 13 villages; and
- the elaboration of a plan for the ecological restoration and general development of the watershed, which was ultimately funded by the state government with 29 million pesos (£1.3 million).

Researchers stressed the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context, of creating new parameters for negotiation and of respecting the often slow pace of political and social change. Outside agents such as researchers, however, can only create an opportunity. In this case, change only truly began once indigenous community groups took the initiative to demand their rights, and after a natural event opened the way for a new relationship among actors.

How do you improve accountability around shared resources?

- **Understand the contradictions among local perceptions of rights:** Conflicting legal frameworks within the web of political and economic power make it difficult to institutionalise accountability mechanisms. The principles that underpin indigenous institutions, such as reciprocity and cooperation, can be reframed in terms of the management of common good.
- **Strategies for accountability need to be long-term:** Negotiation must be seen as a medium-term and long-term strategy dependent on many internal and external factors. The three-year outlook of a municipal government is not long enough to consolidate new institutional arrangements.
- **Change needs to take place on both sides of the equation:** Both the government and the community have to be more open to the possibilities of a partnership or dialogue. The government needs to create deliberative spaces open to all actors and respectful of the different perceptions, needs and proposals of others. The community needs to have better capacity to improve the management of their own water resources and put aside their internal differences.
- **Building alliances for accountability is vital:** The strengthening of alliances between different levels and forms of government is an important first step, in the hope that the cycle of conflict and environmental degradation can be ended. In order to foster integration between environmental management, forestry and water policies it is important that the relationship with urban water authorities be deepened.
- **Communities require autonomy to manage economic resources:** For a more efficient and democratic use of resources directed toward solving environmental and social problems, it is necessary to respect the autonomy of the communities and avoid intermediaries.