ABSTRACT

Title of case

The 'Water War' to resist privatisation of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia

Subtitle

Problems encountered in the implementation of the private sector participation model in countries with a weak regulatory system.

Description

The international consortium "Aguas del Tunari" was granted a concession to supply drinking water and a sewerage services to the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia in September 1999. A month and a half later, the No. 2029 Act for the regulation of the water and sanitation sector was passed, containing a set of rules to legitimise such contracts with a strong bias towards privatisation and in addition, including rules that aimed to regulate the use and exploitation of water resources.

Both events caused popular reactions and led to mass mobilisation of the population. In urban areas, the protests were sparked by the perceived excessive increases in water tariffs, and in rural communities, there was widespread concern about the effects of the new law on traditional rights and access to water for irrigation and domestic uses. Social conflict erupted in February and April 2000, with several days of intense clashes between the so called "guerreros del agua" (water warriors) and the police. These clashes culminated in the declaration of a national state of siege.

Social discontent was so great that the only possible solution was the cancellation of the Contract that had been agreed with the *Consorcio Aguas del Tunari* and the modification of more than 30 articles of the No. 2029 Act, which would become the new No. 2066 Act. What happened in the "guerra del agua" (water war) in Cochabamba started a process of wider grassroots participation in the formulation of regulations and policies concerning water resources. It is in this context that the *Consejo Interinstitucional del Agua* or *CONIAG* (Inter-institutional Water Council) has been recently created, as a forum where government representatives, social organizations, the private sector, academic institutions and municipalities participate with the mission of reaching a consensus in the formulation of a new policy and water legislation for Bolivia.

Lessons learned

- The difficulties encountered in the implementation of policies and legislation that does not take into account pre-existent rights (in the case of Bolivia peasant and indigenous rights).
- That it is not possible to regulate the use and exploitation of a natural resource like water with sector related legislation only: it needs to integrate all the water uses.
- Privatisation is not necessarily limited to corporate companies. Another option involves other organized bodies such as water committees and cooperatives that typically function under the civil law but with different mechanisms of social control and participation.
- The full cost recovery principle should be applied cautiously in poor countries like Bolivia where public investment is still needed.
- Regulations need to be strengthened and made more efficient as the first step in any privatisation. It is necessary to create mechanisms of social control that allow for more transparency, and are therefore less vulnerable to corruption in the regulation of basic services.
- It is evident that social participation, public access to information, and transparency in the administration of services and resources are fundamental aspects of good governance.

Importance of case for IWRM

This case study highlights the importance of social and community participation in the development of regulations, management rules, policies and institutions in relation to the management water resources and the provision of water and sanitation services, and what can go wrong when these processes are absent or flawed. Possibly, the conflict could have been avoided if the reform process had involved strong

participation, dialogue and agreement between all the parties involved. On the other hand, the case illustrates how a combination of negotiation and social mobilization around positive counter-proposals can lead to important changes in politics and legislation at national level.

Tools used

- A2.3 Reform of existing legislation
- A2.1 Water rights
- B1.8 Role of the private sector
- A1.2 Policies in relation to water resources
- B1.9 Civil society institutions and community based organisations

Keywords

Policies, legislation, water rights, social organizations, privatisation, participation, water supply and sanitation

MAIN TEXT

1 Problems



In fact, some of the first judicial cases during colonial times were related to water disputes. The most recent conflict started during the sixties, when the recently established SEMAPA carried out the first attempts to drill water wells in the Central Valley, aimed at improving the provision of drinking water for the city of Cochabamba.

Over recent decades the growing water rationing and the total lack of service in several districts of the city made the population resort to alternative means of water provision, such as bulk liquid carriers and private wells that frequently were unsafe regarding quality, and to exert political pressure on the government to undertake substantial investments in long-term projects for water provision (See Box No. 1).

A rush to privatisation and reform

In Bolivia there are marked differences and inequalities in access to water between urban and rural areas, and between different locations. The city of Cochabamba (the Cercado) has approximately 470,000 inhabitants (76% of the total population in the department), and only 55% of people are covered by drinking water services. According to a study carried by Nickson and Vargas (2001), the poorest sectors of the population are in general the most deprived of services. The provision of water and sanitation services was (and is now again) a responsibility of the Servicio Municipal de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado (Drinking Water and Sewage Municipal Service) or SEMAPA, a municipal public concern, with autonomous administration and its own assets.

Cochabamba is located in a valley where the scarcity of water has generated conflicts over a long period.

> . Box No1. The Multipurpose Project of Misicuni (energy, drinking water and irrigation)

For many decades the Bolivian government has been trying to find alternatives to provide, on a long term basis, water to the city of Cochabamba. The strategy was mainly based on groundwater exploitation and the implementation of the Misicuni project. This project became one of the most constant demands of the Cochabamba population who even organised civil strikes and protests to push for its prompt implementation.

The project attempts to supply water for the city, for agricultural activities and energy generation. According to a World Bank report (1999) it had an estimated cost of \$US 252 million for its four main components: a tunnel, water supply, electricity generation and water distribution. It was linked to the Concession granted to the Consortium, under the premise that if Cochabamba wanted Misicuni, then it will have to pay for it following the principle of "full cost recovery"...

In a World Bank Report (1999) the country situation regarding water services and sanitation was summarized as follows:

"In the early 1990s, the Government initiated a reform process of the water and sanitation sector. Significant progress has been made, but there have been large and inequitable increases in regional coverage (urban Vs. rural) and with a certain degree of bias against the poor. The reforms consolidated institutions and elevated the hierarchy of the sector. The current administration has formulated a modern regulatory framework which will promote PSP. The challenge ahead lies in implementing the regulatory framework. Further adjustment are necessary" (Report No. 19232 – BO, June 14, 1999).

According to information provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INE) in 1997 Cochabamba had a total coverage in the provision of piped water of 66% (82% Urban and 46% rural)¹ and a total sanitation coverage of 66% (87% urban and 39% rural). These services were mostly provided by the Municipal Water Company (SEMAPA), who faced a lot of problems relating to efficiency and sustainability. New investments were needed to expand the network and to find new sources for the increasing population of the city.

The Bolivian government's answer (under the strong influence of international cooperation bodies²) was to look for the private sector to provide the necessary investment to restructure the water and sanitation system. The assumption underlying this was that promoting Private Sector Participation (PSP) would not only increase efficiency but liberate public funds for investment in rural areas. The tendering process was first started in 1997, but it had to be stopped because the municipality, which owned the assets, was not part of the process. After a judicial mandate that stipulated the inclusion of the municipality in the bidding process, the auction started again en September 1999 and the contract was won by a multinational consortium, "Aguas del Tunari". It is important to mention here that Aguas del Tunari was the only one that answered the first call for proposals, but it did not meet all the criteria set. To solve this problem the Bolivian government established an inter-institutional commission to negotiate the conditions of the contract with the consortium. This commission was formed by: the Vice Ministry of Investment and Privatization, the regional government representative (Prefecto), the major, the water superintendent, electricity superintendent, the executive director of SEMAPA and the general manager of MISICUNI³. The main issue discussed by this commission was to reduce the requirements established in the bid regarding the Misicuni project. After various meetings, finally an agreement was reached and the commission suggested awarding the contract to Aguas del Tunari because it was said to be in the national interest and particularly for the interest of Cochabamba.

The contract gave the company exclusive rights of exploitation of water resources and provision of services in an area that comprised almost the total area of *Cercado* (where the city of Cochabamba is situated). These rights could also be extended to the nearby valleys. This is precisely where several traditional organizations of *regantes* (right holders in irrigation systems) and sources for small neighbourhood, communal or municipal services of drinking water are located, the rights of which were all affected by this clause of the contract. In addition, a new structure of water tariffs agreed in the contract had a progressive character that classified the users into nine groups. In accordance with this structure, the licensee (concessionaire) was guaranteed a minimum return rate of 15% and a maximum of 17% on their investment. To obtain these returns, an increase in the tariffs (charges for water) was necessary, which during January 2000 was an average of 35%, but reaching at times levels of 150%. Furthermore, it was allowed according to the contract that "the value in dollars of all the rates ... will be adjusted annually... taking into account cost-inflation in American dollars expressed as variations in the Consumer Prices Index in USA". (Annex inc, 1.5 of the Contract of AdT). All this, together with irregularities in the tender process and in the execution of the contract caused an immediate reaction from several sectors of the population of Cochabamba.

Soon after signing the contract that privatised SEMAPA, the No. 2029 Act on the "Prestacion de Servicios de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado Sanitario" (Provision of Drinking Water and Sewage

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¹ Source: INE, November 1997

² "Municipal Water utility companies are subject to political intervention and operational efficiency is low. The Only solution is to introduce PSP through a concession an arm-length relationship such a a management contract." Report No. 19232 – BO, June 14, 1999

³ The President of the Civic Committee of Cochabamba, also participates in this Commission but without the right to vote.

Services) was approved. This act was a national set of rules aimed at regulating the sector, but in addition due to the absence of relevant legislation in the country the act contained stipulations about the use and exploitation of the resource itself. Among other things, through an Interim Section, the Act gave ample faculties to assign rights over the water resources to the sector authority for Basic Sanitation, without establishing any regulation over guidance criteria, limitations, rights and obligations of the licensee. On the other hand, despite progress in discussions about the acknowledgement of the rights of the indigenous and peasant communities in the process of the drafting of the new act, No. 2029, did not include any stipulation to this respect. Regarding the provision of services, Act No. 2029 granted special privileges to large companies and cooperatives, such as exclusive rights for providing basic sanitation services and utilisation of water sources for a period of 40 years. Other five year contracts for water rights were granted to water committees, cooperatives and communal systems etc.

The exclusive rights to the concessions, implying a de facto monopoly, were further complemented by other stipulations such as: the prohibition of establishing new abstraction points by others in the area of the concession, the obligation of consumers to be connected to the system and the prohibition of alternative systems of provision of services within the area in concession. The bias of the act towards privatisation was explicit and expressed itself through stipulations seeking economic efficiency without regulation to ensure benefits also passed to the users, instead of seeking to provide a universal, social and equitable access to the service.

Both in the awarding of the concession contract, as well as in the process of approval of the No. 2029 Act, the participation of the population was limited. The Government invited those that were considered as "stakeholders" but that in reality did not represent the key sectors of the population. Representation was formal and legalised, but not necessarily legitimate. And awarding the service to a private company meant a subsequent reduction in the possibilities for social control and users' participation.

A combination of factors including the discontent of the peasant communities concerned about access to water for irrigation and community managed water supplies, urban consumers and social organizations who were dissatisfied with the new tariff regime that the consortium attempted to impose, and irregularities discovered in awarding the contract generated the conflict known as "Guerra del Agua" (water war) in Cochabamba in February and April 2000. Social protests were channelled through the "Coordinadora Departamental en Defensa del Agua y de la Vida", an umbrella organization that brought together diverse urban and rural groups around a common demand: the cancellation of the contract with Aguas del Tunari and changes to Act No. 2029.

2 Decisions and Actions Taken

The water war

In order to understand what happened in Cochabamba during the "Guerra del Agua", a brief summary of events is necessary, from the beginning of the conflict, through its development and most important stages until its final resolution.

Chronology of the "Guerra del Agua" in Cochabamba

Date	Events
10 January	Meeting of Coordinadora to analyse the contract with Aguas del Tunari and the 2029 Act

⁴ This type of regulation had the approval of financial institutions such as the World Bank, which in a report on the country stated, "(...) in the Bolivian context, it is appropriate for the Superintendence to award the concessions. In principle this poses a conflict of interest but the arrangement has worked well in other sectors..." (World Bank 1999 xxvii.).

xxvii.).

⁵ Under English legislation, companies are obliged to pass the gains in efficiency to the users, so the rates come down

⁶ The "Coordinadora" brought together the Comité de Defensa del Agua (Committee for the Defence of Water), the Federacion de Regantes de Cochabamba (Federation of Irrigation Waters Users of Cochabamba), the Federación de Fabriles (Federation of Factory Workers), the Federacion de Maestros (Federation of Teachers), the Federacion de Comerciantes (Federation of Commerce), the Federacion de Campesinos (Peasants Federation) and others and professional bodies such as the associations of civil engineers, lawyers and economists.

11 January	Blockade of the city of Cochabamba, Community Stoppage/Civil strike
13 January	March and Open Meeting of the Council
	Negotiations start with representatives of the "Coordinadora" and the Community
	Committee, seeking agreement on the following topics:
	- Creation of a commission to study the charges/tariffs
	- Revision of the contract with Aguas del Tunari
	- Revision and change of the 2029 Act within 45 days
	- Agreement on the proposals about the General Act on Water Resources in public hearings
4 February	March and "Occupation of Cochabamba". Strong repression from the government
5 February	Clashes between demonstrators and the police
	Signing of the "Cochabamba Agreement". Its main points were:
	1. The implementation of the Misicuni project
	2. Rates would be revised, and meanwhile they would be frozen at October 1999 levels
	3. Open negotiations on proposals for changes to the 2029 Act
	4. Creation of commissions to revise the technical, financial and legal aspects of the
	Contract with Aguas del Tunari
End of February	Negotiations and the work of commissions stagnated
26 March	Popular Consultation of the Coordinadora del Agua y de la Vida
	Questions:
	1. Do you accept the tariff increases?
	2. Should the Contract with Aguas del Tunari be cancelled?
	3. Do you agree with the privatisation? of water resources in the 2029 Act?
	Results:
	48,276 persons voted.
	Question 1: 99% answered No
	Question 2: 96% answered Yes
	Question 3: 97% answered No
31 March	A Civic Stoppage/civil strike is called for the 4th of April
	Peasant's road blockades start at a national level
4 April	Civic Stoppage/civil strike in Cochabamba
5 April	Thousands of people meet in the Cochabamba Square and demand the departure of Aguas del Tunari.
6 April	The square is taken again
1	Negotiations with a government delegation start
	Several delegates from the "Coordinadora" are detained
7 April	A crowd occupies the square demanding the cancellation of the contract and the revision of
	the No. 2029 Act
	Barricades are set up and the square is occupied by the people
	The Governor announces both the cancellation of the contract with the company and his
	resignation
	During the night several leaders of the "Coordinadora" are arrested and their houses are
	raided
8 April	Astate of siege is declared in the country for 90 days
1	Clashes in the city between police and demonstrators ("Water Warriors") intensify
9 April	Official announcement of the withdrawal of Aguas del Tunari, but the population demand to
, 11p111	see the documents
10 April	An agreement between the Government and the "Coordinadora" is signed, establishing that:
	1. SEMAPA will again be in charge of the service under the direction of the
	Municipality and of popular/civil and professional organizations
	2. The blockades will be lifted when the changes to the No. 2029 Act in Parliament are
	approved and evidence of the cancellation of the contract is produced
	The first condition is fulfilled in the evening of the same day
11 April	The President enacts the new No.2066 Act that reforms 36 sections of the previous act
_	The state of siege is lifted
20 April	The state of stege is lifted

Sources: Elaborated by the author from newspapers and periodical library, January- April 2000

Amongst the actions taken during the conflict, the following are considered fundamental by the author to the outcome described above:

- Negotiations combined with effective social organisation and pressure. The organization that led the demonstrations, the "Coordinadora Departamental del Agua y de la Vida", became the legitimate representative of the demands of the population of Cochabamba despite the hostility of the government. The "Coordinadora" participated through its members in several negotiations to try to solve the conflict, but when the government showed to be unyielding, it resorted to demonstrations and social pressure. This combination was successful in achieving their aims.
- Effective technical arguments in negotiations. The social organizations and the "Coordinadora" were able to effectively mobilise technical arguments. Studies were done by professionals who well recognized in the sector, and through a "technical team" they supported, as well the social organizations in the revision of the Concession Contract, the Tariffs and the Law No. 2029. This helped to move the discussions towards the core issues rather than the ideological ones and in this way to reach some basic agreements.
- Generation of alternative proposals. A fundamental factor was civil society's capacity to propose solutions. Not only demands were put across, but also alternative solutions regarding the concession contract, and the changes necessary to reform Act No. 2029. Once the conflict was over, a proposition on the regulation of Act No. 2066 was prepared, whose approval is pending and is part of the current demands of social organizations. The proposals dealt with issues such as: social participation and social control in the process of granting a concession contract, the definition of tariffs and the regulation of the service provision, reforms to the tariff structure, and to separate regulation of the service provision and the resource management. In relation to this last point a separation was made between the legal ways to obtain a right to provide the service: concession, license and register; and the ways to obtain a right over the resource: authorization and register. The registers were created as a way to protect indigenous and local rights, and were meant to last for the "lifetime of the service". Finally, the exclusivity rights (monopoly) of a concessionaire or license holder were limited in a service area, because they usually coexist with small systems. Many of these proposals were included in the new law and debated in the process of design of the bylaws.
- **Technical support of social organisations.** The process of generating proposals was supported by an advisory technical team, capable of adequately combining academic theory with the demands made by social organisations, and based on a solid knowledge of the water problems in the country.
- 4 Alliances and partnership. Another key element was the strategic alliance developed between urban and rural sectors that allowed the consolidation of a strong movement that was subsequently able to put forward clear and socially legitimate demands to the government.
- ♣ **Direct democracy.** This was an important strategy that gave legitimacy to the protest movement. Decisions were taken in open public spaces, where the whole population without exception could participate. These open meetings decided on future steps in a collective and inclusive way, thus recovering direct forms of democratic participation. Another mechanism employed was the Popular Consultation that put three questions to the population and obtained answers from around 50,000 citizens.

3 Outcomes

Positive achievements of the resistance

Through an objective assessment, the following are, in the author's opinion, the main positive achievements of the social protests:

Restoration of the public character of the water company SEMAPA, but now with a better level of social participation and control in its board of directors.

- Lord Change of the Ley de Servicios de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado Sanitario (Water and Sewage Services Act) in 36 of its sections. Among other things the new Act guarantees: respect of small systems for drinking water supply; recognition of the rights of indigenous populations and peasants to their water sources and drinking water systems; social control of contracts and charges/tariff reviews.
- Opening-up of government and international financial organisations to the processes of dialogue and social consultation that should be followed in the formulation of laws and regulations on water. This is expressed in the start up of several consultation processes, for example, in developing the regulations of the No. 2066 Act and Normativa de Riego (set of regulations on irrigation) as well as the creation of the Consejo Interinstitucional del Agua or CONIAG (Inter-Institutional Water Council) as a "[...] space of dialogue and concertation between the government and the economic and social organizations to the current legal, institutional and technical framework on water-related issues, so as to tidy up and regulate the water resources management" (Action Plan, CONIAG).

Challenges

However, there are still many challenges to confront, since following the water war:

- The water problem in Cochabamba is not yet resolved and still around 40% of the population has no access to adequate services. There are extra and easily accessible water sources for the short term, except groundwater where large investments are needed and not easy to obtain.
- SEMAPA itself faces some specific challenges.
 - The Bolivian government has forced SEMAPA to sign a Contract of Concession for 40 years. This Contract binds the Company to pay the *Superintendencia de Saneamiento Basico* (Basic Sanitation Regulatory Authority) a regulatory rate of 1.5% of its income annually.
 - Additionally, the Contract excludes the Company from public subsidies available to the sector. Furthermore, it is subject to double regulation, due to its public character.
 - o In the National Plan for Water and Sanitation (2001 2010), it has been established that SEMAPA has to increase the coverage from 58% to 90%, mostly through the use of new sources like Misicuni (30% of the drinking water component cost being financed by SEMAPA); increase the sanitation coverage from 55% to 70% and to improve the network and control leakage.
 - There are also attempts to create a metropolitan area (joining various municipalities near Cochabamba city) that according to the Plan would be managed by SEMAPA under an operation contract.
 - o In order to do all this, recently SEMAPA has obtained a credit of US\$3.9 million from the IADB through the Regional Development National Fund (FNDR) to implement a project to expand water supply, study a minimum cost solution for sewage treatment and begin a program of institutional development for the company. Another US\$13 million is expected to be invested once the first phase of the project is concluded.
- The consortium has presented a lawsuit for US\$25 million to the International Court on Controversies and Investments (CIADI) in The Hague, claiming breach of Contract⁷. The case is

⁷As soon as the presentation of a lawsuit by the company *Aguas del Tunari* was known, a coalition of several groups was organised, with the aim of lodging complaints before different bodies. Members of this coalition include the *Coordinadora del Agua y de la Vida*, the *Federacion de Regantes* and the *Fundacion Solon* (Solon Foundation) in Bolivia; the Democracy Center, Public Citizen, International Forum on Globalisation, Global Exchange and the Institute for Policy Studies in USA; and X Minus Y in Holland.

On 1st July 2002, this coalition obtained its first victory in the USA. The Directing Board of Supervisors of San Francisco (the highest authority of the municipal government of San Francisco, California), approved a Resolution demanding that the Corporation Bechtel "immediately withdraw its *punitive legal lawsuit in the international courts against Bolivia and its people, and refrain from initiating any other litigation or lawsuit of mediation – in or out of the EEUU borders- against that South American country"*. Resolution of the The Directing Board of Supervisors of San Francisco, 1st July 2002).

On 29 August 2002, several non-governmental organisations sent a letter to the World Bank Group, demanding public access to the proceedings at ICSID. They are still awaiting a response from this entity, but in a similar previous case, the Court rejected a legal action against the Federal Government of Tucuman, Argentina that had been

- going to be resolved by a secret court and according to the regular procedure is going to be kept under secrecy.
- Although demonstrations initiated mainly from the organization of *regantes* (users of water for *irrigation*) and small drinking water systems to defend their rights over the water sources that they currently use, these rights are still not secure as the regulations that would allow their legal recognition have not yet been approved.

4 Lessons learned and replicability

The main conclusions and lessons that can be learnt from these experiences relate to both water resources, and to the provision of water and sanitation services:

With regards to water resources, the Cochabamba experience shows:

- How difficult it is to formulate and implement policies and legislation on water resources management from upper levels (top-down) in a context like Bolivia where there has been, for a long time, an autonomous administration of resources by peasant communities and social organizations based upon what they call "customs and traditions" i.e. rules defined and legitimised by local communities.
- That it is not possible to regulate the use and exploitation of water resource with sector-related legislation alone. This is and has been attempted in other sectors like the mining sector, the hydroelectrical sector, and others.

Regarding the provision of the drinking water and sewage services, we should make several conclusions:

- Some basic assumptions of privatisation should be questioned and qualified. For example, it is evident
 that the participation in reformed service provision should not be limited exclusively to private
 enterprises, but it should consider other organised bodies, such as the cooperative movement and other
 community bodies as well as possibilities for cooperation between the public and the private sector.
- Exceptions to the principle of "full-cost recovery" and a more flexible approach must be considered in some cases, especially in poor countries like Bolivia, where public investment through subsidies and other forms of assistance are necessary.
- The regulation of the services is an important issue. Regulations need to be strengthened and made more efficient as the first step in any privatisation. If this is not the case, companies will take advantage of the weaknesses of government against the interests of consumers. It is necessary to create mechanisms of social control that allow for more transparency, and therefore less corruption in the regulation of basic services.
- It is evident that social participation, public access to information, and transparency in the administration of services and resources are fundamental. The exclusion of the population from the decision-making process creates a basis for the emergence of problems and conflicts. The constructive participation of everyone, not only a few, in reform processes must be attempted. In this sense, laws and policies should be a social creation and in their elaboration the participation of the population should be considered. This is even more important when resources and services that are essential for life and health are at stake.
- Finally, it is worth investing time, effort and resources in processes of dialogue and agreement as a way of avoiding conflicts whose social and economic costs are incalculable.

5 Contacts, references, organisations and people

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http://www.aguabolivia.org

This site managed by the CGIAB provides a portal to a wide range of water related information in Bolivia and links to further resources in South America including other articles above the water war in Cochabamba.

http://www.funsolon.org

The Fundación Solon website includes information on water, land and environmental issues in Bolivia and Latin America.

http://www.centroagua.org/

Website for the Andean Centre for the Management and Use of Water at the Universidad Mayor de San Simón in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

http://www.psiru.org/

PSIRU at the University of Greenwich, UK, researches privatization and restructuring of public services around the world, with special focus on water, energy, waste management, and healthcare

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