

**Generating transitional space  
between professional and indigenous communities  
for sustainable water management in the Andes**

Short title: Between professional and indigenous communities

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**Abstract**

Multi-actor initiatives that aim at enhancing environmental sustainability and social equity, face the complex tensions between institutionalized decision-makers, backed up by expert knowledge, and communities with locally embedded knowledge and interests. Such projects are generally initiated by professional expert organizations. 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 (six years) of the authors with a multi-actor initiative in Southern Ecuador on sustainable rural drinking water management. We were involved in this case as action-researchers, facilitating multiparty interactions and supporting reflective practice among the participants.

The inequalities between the expert organizations and the indigenous communities in this case are deeply rooted in their history and context. They tend to be reproduced through interactions not only inside but also outside the multi-actor initiative. The article illustrates how multiparty processes can take profit of identities, workforms, structures and activities that cross the boundaries between communities of expert and indigenous practice. They do this by creating a transitory social space in which contradictions can come to the fore, whereas they offer also opportunities to deal with the situated and complex interrelationships between these communities.

Keywords: Communities of practice; Community participation; Multiparty collaboration; Sustainable water management; Transitional space.

### **Conceptualizing diversity and inequality**

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), 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; Carroll & 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 the economical and political power. The cities are the places where the professionals reside 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 superposed the one on the other, reinforcing each other and giving rise to the image of a "dual society" (Pauwels, 1983).

However this binary view does no longer give a satisfying account of the current reality 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 in the Andean societies 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 clearly indicated in the context of our case study, current studies orient the 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 communities may be primarily based on geographical proximity, family relations and/or ethnic identity, as is the case for indigenous communities, while other communities may be based on different kinds of professional expertise or a common organizational structure, as in modern organizations. As a consequence of the interactions between these two types of communities or between members belonging to both kinds of communities, there is a hybridization of the communities 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 produced and reproduced in the Andes as in the rest of Latin America (Garcia Canclini, 1996; Nygren, 1999).

We will argue here that 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 (Lewis 2000).

Reflexivity on 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 a 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). According to Hardy & Phillips (1998) this implies analyzing:

- how different stakeholders, relying on personal and collective memory of parallel and previous interactions among each other in a broader social-historical context, give sense to the initiative under study,
- how the framing of the initiative by the different parties, enables to take into account certain interests and to include 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 tendencies in the social sciences have contributed to call the attention on the exclusion of local communities, by analyzing the relationship between knowledge production, types of discourse and social interests (Nygren, 1999). Sociologists like Bourdieu, Habermas, Foucault and Giddens have all in their way warned for the dangers of a technocratic society (Flood & Romm, 1996). Critical approaches question the self-evidence of apparently objective knowledge that does not take into account the knowing actors. In the analysis of a multiparty initiative we have to pay attention to the discursive legitimacy of the frames used by the different actors, because the different kinds of experiences, arguments and interests that different actors bring in the interaction are not equally accepted. Actors exert power because the authority of their arguments can not 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...”.

The former account suggests a dichotomy between local communities producing local knowledge on the one hand, and modern organizations producing expert’s knowledge on the other hand. A social-constructionist perspective on knowledge creation and communities-of-practice may help to correct this 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 a virtually local community of research practice and product of the interactions with specific kinds of application contexts.

Through our case we intent to identify mechanisms that help to deal with the paradox of community participation in multiparty initiatives. Our working hypothesis is that transitory social spaces, crossing boundaries between indigenous and professional experts’ communities-of practice (identities, structures, action strategies, symbols) contribute to deal with this paradox. We suppose that it is not this space in itself, but the process of crossing the boundaries and constituting those new spaces, while reflecting on the differences and the boundaries among the involved actors, that allows dealing with the tension of the paradox.

## **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 “participation” of the local communities was mostly limited to support by free manual work. After completion of the infrastructure, the communities were generally left with the responsibility to maintain the drinking water service. Most of the time they lacked technical, financial, administrative and organizational capacities to cope with this responsibility. As a consequence, in the region of our case study, according to the results of a Rapid Rural Appraisal in 1995, the majority of the communities (more than 200 in total) disposed of a drinking water infrastructure, but only 15 % indicated receiving an “acceptable” water quantity and quality.

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

A multiparty initiative to enhance the sustainability of the rural drinking water service in the South Ecuadorian communities originated as part of a large scale Integrated Rural Development project in the same region, financed by international and national public funding. The original aim of that project was to enhance agricultural productivity by building a huge dam for irrigation purposes. However 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 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. According to the commission rural drinking water supply was recognized by all actors as an issue that could bring the conflicting parties together. The institutional actors, involved in the projects, would get access and legitimacy in the communities with the drinking water component, especially in those where they had been strongly rejected before.

The project, in which some 75 professionals belonging to three different public institutions, an international cooperation agencies and a national NGO worked together, invited an additional foreign NGO specialized in water-related activities and community organization (PROTOS VZW), to strengthen the drinking water component. This new NGO took up a convening role for an even broader interorganizational initiative. According to the NGO, and contrary to the prevailing public and non-governmental opinion in Ecuador, priority was not only to be given to the construction of new infrastructure, but also 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, mid-nineties, a national parliamentary debate was starting on the decentralization of the public administration. As a consequence of decentralization 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 representatives expressed caution and scepticism concerning a possible taking over of “their” water systems by the municipalities, which they depicted as paternalist and corrupt

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

Representatives of the convening NGO participated in workshops on “multiparty collaboration” organized by ACORDES, a research and consultancy centre at the State University of Cuenca giving social process support to regional development initiatives, to which the authors are linked. At these workshops professionals involved in various development projects reflected on and exchanged experiences, based on the principles of Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983), with the concepts and frameworks of for instance Gray (1989), Bouwen & Fry (1991), Wilson & Charlton (1997). As a side effect of these workshops the NGO invited ACORDES to support the starting up of a multiparty initiative in the drinking water domain, by conducting a “feasibility study”. Indeed, the ideas that we promoted in our workshops, 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.

We considered this study as a unique opportunity for an action-research (Dick, 1999; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Selener, 1997) to build up a relationship with the parties involved in this initiative and to learn with them “from within” about multiparty processes in a turbulent context faced with high cultural diversity, social inequalities, environmental challenges and rapid societal changes. As process consultants our interventions changed 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 six years later, some of us are still involved in this way in offshoots of the process that we describe here.

The research team was internally heterogeneous, representing various degrees and ways of involvement with the other actors: partly Ecuadorians, partly Europeans residing permanently in Ecuador, and partly Europeans on study visits in Ecuador; some with an academic background and others with a background in community work; some maintaining intense contacts with the NGO's and others more at home with the public institutes and municipalities.

From the initial conversations between the NGO and ACORDES on, different perspectives between both actors appeared, which led sometimes to intense discussions, but did not endanger the relation. The NGO tended to focus on the technical content when they referred to their own and others actions, and insisted on converging as quickly as possible by involving not too many stakeholders and establishing concrete agreements among these actors rapidly. ACORDES tended to frame the initiative in relational process terms, by focussing on opportunities for dialogue, trust, negotiation, identification and expressing conflict. ACORDES insisted on diverging by exploring in an open way all the actors linked to the initiative and their ways to frame the issue under consideration.

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

The convening NGO had the ambition to have a regional impact on the quality of the rural drinking water supply. Their representatives were aware that they could not realize their mission alone, but they did not know which other actors had to be involved, in which way these actors could be

involved and what they eventually could do together? From the start we tried to explain to the convener that an external “objective” study of a multiparty domain is not possible. An in-depth stakeholder analysis turned out to be the start of the interaction process.

The joint analysis with social actors of their interests linked to drinking water, through open in-depth interviews and focus groups, and the feedback we gave them through personal contacts of the results of this stakeholder analysis enhanced the awareness among the actors of the fragmentation of the rural drinking water domain. In our stakeholder analysis we identified a broad variety of social actors as linked to the rural drinking water domain, including NGO's (4 national Ecuadorian and 2 international), local governments (3 municipalities, 1 provincial council), 3 national and 1 regional public institution (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.

When we intend to classify those organizations according to their degree of professionalization or local embeddedness, it becomes directly clear that there is no dichotomy between both. 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 indigenous umbrella organizations, local water councils or village councils? They are lowly 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? Similar observations can be made according to other dichotomous institutional characterizations, like urban

– rural and modern – traditional. In the course of the process that we analyze in this article there has been a gradual increase of institutional “blurring”. We shall analyze later how this influenced the multiparty process.

Not all organizations came into play right from the beginning, while others disappeared from the multiparty-group later. A couple of national NGO’s for instance were very active in the beginning, but as they stopped their activities in the region, so did their contribution to the multiparty-initiative. Public institutions were immediately identified as stakeholders, but incorporated slowly in the activities. Other organizations, like the village councils, started functioning in the course of the process analyzed here, and they incorporated their contribution to the multiparty-initiative as part of their mission.

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, 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.

In a second study we tried to make more explicit with the stakeholders their (often implicit) relational logic and strategies with respect to the multiparty domain. How did the actors conceive their relation with the others? Were they interested to participate in a joint initiative? What would eventually motivate them to do this? Which experiences from the past would eventually restrain them from collaborating? How did they conceive their own contribution and that of the others in an eventual multiparty initiative? This questioning sharpened even more the awareness among the stakeholders of mutual sensibilities and rivalries. Actors presented images of others in function of their own interests and insights, and in ways that were not imagined or that were probably not acceptable for these others. During the stakeholder analysis the communication among the actors about the drinking water issues was largely indirect and mediated through ACORDES.

#### *A common vision search workshop*

The convening NGO invited all the actors that had been contacted during the previous phase on a starting event. The response was high. ACORDES designed and facilitated a two-day workshop to converge the multiparty group around a common vision, without losing out of sight the diverse interests and frames that emerged before. 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 professional institutes of the other institutes.

As a result of the first workshop 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*

The convening NGO took up a strong “leading” role to make the multi-actor commissions function: their members made and distributed the invitations, they prepared the agenda and draft proposals to be discussed and wrote the reports. They tried to mobilize and motivate people to participate actively in the commissions but had to observe that especially community representatives participated only marginally.

We were not directly involved as process consultants during this phase, but we had some conversations with commission members and we reflected with the convener afterwards on the

results and the process as an input for the following multiparty workshop. We found out that 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. While for the professionals working in the commissions was their job, 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 convener organized a second multiparty workshop with the intention to discuss and integrate the results of the different commissions, and to analyze how a commitment to the proposal could be fostered. The conversations among the participants in this workshop were more confrontational than in the former workshop as the “hot” and “sensible” issues were now clear for all (e.g. to maintain an autonomous management for their own drinking system for communities; to invest in new drinking water infrastructure for the municipalities). During the workshop municipal and indigenous community representatives expressed directly and openly their mutual distrust and the discussions between both actors became polarized.

A basic agreement could be reached at the end of the day that was restricted to the shared motivation of all participants to continue working on a joint project. As to the content, - the structure and tasks of a future collaboration - the agreement looked weak as it was stated in vague terms, not only because there was not yet a clear agreement, but also because not all participants had a mandate to assume such a commitment. However, in the agreement, which was signed solemnly in presence of the others and of the regional press, the participants expressed their will “to support all actions necessary to put the collaboration in practice.” As facilitators of the meeting, we considered this final act as a mechanism to strengthen the psychological contract among the participants.

After this workshop the convener maintained intense bilateral contacts with the different parties. In a growing number of communities the NGO 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. Additionally the NGO started also 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 and exclusively with and for marginalized rural communities, the NGO came to know better the municipal actors.

The convening NGO complained internally about the lack of competences and motivation in the communities as well as in the municipalities, ascribing strong paternalistic and selfish attitudes to the latter. But at the same time we noticed growing trust, credibility and expectations in the communities and in the municipalities towards this NGO. In this evolution where the convener increasingly monopolized a third party position in-between polarized municipality and community

positions, it was harder for the other non-governmental and public institutes to identify their contribution and as a consequence their presence in the multiparty activities diminished.

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

The convener ascribed the slowness of the process and the weak involvement of the other counterparts to a lack of legal clarity of the multiparty collaboration. 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 did not have proprietary titles of their drinking water systems. And Ecuadorian law did not provide a legal figure that allowed integrating different types of organizations.

The convener NGO invited all interested parties to a judicial workshop to resolve these legal questions. In this workshop the solution was presented by two lawyers 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 autarchy 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 a consortium charter to their specific interests.

A lot of creativity and lobbying 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. But despite this converging intention of the charter, it also diverges the domain, as the actors are treated as specialized, distinct 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. The following section illustrates that a political evolution in the context contributed to blur this distinction.

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 major 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 actors. 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 decided to take part in the initiative as a result of the support of the councillors, and 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 of a number of activities to support the sustainability of the rural drinking water provision. Only after almost six years the first “Service Centre” was put into practice, carrying out that kind of supporting

activities for a cluster of 45 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 multiparty leadership of the centres tended to assume also other water-related activities like: 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 gradual involvement of the national public water institute generated the opportunity to spread the multiparty approach as a valuable alternative for drinking water management.

The Service Centre is not just a virtual place, it refers also to a real building with an infrastructure. All the parties had 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, advice to resolve problems with their water system or to participate in training sessions. The personnel of the Service Centres is from their own communities. Before 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 they felt abused by the merchants attending them.

As a consequence of the dramatically growing migration out of the communities abroad, at the end of the 90ies, competences in the community can no longer be concentrated in a reduced number of persons – as the communities risk to loose the necessary competences by the migration of these persons. They have to be shared by a broad group of people, involving much more women as before in technical tasks and in organizational leadership. Training massively local people to maintain and manage their local water systems has become a priority for the Service Centres. As a result the difference between communal lay persons and institutional experts becomes much more diffuse and gradual.

### **Generating transitional space to deal with contradictions**

Through the account of the case study we have intended to illustrate how the mixing and crossing of boundaries between different communities of expert practice and communities of local rural practice, were opportunities to deal with the contradictory tensions resulting from the involvement of both kinds of actors. Transitional spaces, constituted by persons, teams, workforms, activities or artefacts containing the contradictions partly or temporarily, appear as significant mechanisms according to our process view on the initiative:

- *Involving researchers* from ACORDES through action-research and reflexive practice favoured the generation of locally validated knowledge concerning multiparty collaboration for rural drinking water management. However as the initiative advanced the reflexive practice gradually concentrated more on a mutual learning between the convening NGO and the researchers.



- *Exploring stakeholders* revealed the linked interests and mixed discourses among the parties and activated their will to collaborate, as well as a strong mutual distrust among them. Feeding back these results deepened the awareness of both converging and diverging tendencies in the domain.
- *A common vision search workshop* constituted a temporal “bridging” moment between the parties, by alternating and integrating in one large encounter moments that focus the attention to the different and to the common interests, between technical and relational aspects, between short term and long term, generating a “common vision” of the participants. However beyond the workshop there was still a lack of engagement of the actors in this 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, thanks to its mixture of professional technical expertise and strong social community engagement. However, the way they functioned as a third party, preferably keeping the parties apart, reinforced the dichotomous split of the domain and its dependency to get out of it.
- *A legal charter* allowed integrating different kinds of organizations, communities and municipalities, as equals in a mixed organizational structure. However it reified also their separation, as members are only acknowledged as representatives of one or the other actor, defending the interests of their constituencies in front of the other as an opponent.
- *Multiple memberships* of persons pertaining simultaneously to the indigenous communities and to the professionalized institutes, like the indigenous municipal councillors, contributed to the appropriation of the multiparty initiative by the communities and by the municipality. But comments of other municipal councillors and indigenous leaders indicated that these indigenous councillors risked not being taken seriously in the communities as well as in the

municipality, that means losing “full” membership of both kinds of communities, because of being perceived as too strongly engaged with the interests of their (faction of) indigenous communities, or of being perceived as alienated from the indigenous communities.

- *Service Centres as meeting places* in the village centres where indigenous community people can exchange experiences and knowledge. But the main concern expressed by the convening NGO after six years is if the people from the municipalities and other institutes also consider these centres as theirs and will continue supporting them, so that these centres can offer the solutions to rural drinking water supply that make them attractive for the indigenous people?

As we can observe, each of the mechanisms that was put in practice to deal with the differences between the indigenous communities and the other parties, kept the initiative on-going without however “resolving” the contradictions of the multiparty domain. While they hold the contradiction “for a while”, they give the involved actors an opportunity to work together on joined outcomes. But as some 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 workforms, 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. So, simultaneously there is a permanent challenge to reflect on these divisions and exclusions.

The reflections we had with the representatives of the convening NGO revealed that – as a consequence of the paradoxical experiences of excluding communities by the strategies and languages used to include them - at times they felt psychologically thorn by a dilemma 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. They relied on their experience, resources and prestige as foreign funded organization to take the lead of the initiative. But gradually they became aware that such a leading function was contradictory with their intention to reach shared insights and decisions: “Before, we arrived somewhere with our project. We had established unilaterally the objectives, the strategies and the resources, which means 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”, the NGO representative entrusted to us.

A systematic reflection with the convener on the experiences in this multiparty initiative led us to conceptualize different kinds of strategies, which can be conceived as different ways to deal with the paradox of converging and diverging, to include indigenous communities.

- “Leading”: initiating, proposing and actively contributing to the development of practical and feasible solutions, in this case symbolized by the service centres to support the supply of good quality drinking water to communities
- “Supporting communities”: defending and supporting openly the interests of the indigenous community actors and perspectives in the negotiations with the other actors, in this case the municipalities and public institutions that historically tended to marginalize these communities; ensuring that equitable solutions are conceived and put in practice, which respond to the needs and interests of the communities; scouting, preparing, coaching and training of community leaders to take up tasks and responsibilities in the multiparty domain

- “Mediating”: organizing opportunities for direct contact, interactions and negotiations between representatives of communities and municipalities in multiparty workshops and meetings, mixed commissions, interorganizational structures, ensuring that actors listen to each other, develop a common vision with which they can engage and identify
- “Contributing new knowledge”: exploring different frames steering the actions and relational logics of different institutes and local communities; indagating relevant knowledge for the multiparty domain available in the indigenous communities as well as in different professional institutes.

The intention of this “metaphorical” characterization of different intervention alternatives is “generative” (Gergen, K. 1978) that means that it aims at broadening the scope of possible action alternatives, and avoiding too straightforward “reactive” interventions. There is no one best intervention in a situation, but different strategies have to be combined, in one person or in one team, or in different moments of a workshop, or in different actions that can be done simultaneously or subsequently. Action-research and reflective practice in this case is one example of such a combination. But as the progress of a multiparty initiative depends on the creativity to find or generate new opportunities for transitions between contradictory tensions and divisions coming to the fore, it may be a critical example.

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