The mesas técnicas del agua (Technical Water Forum, MTAs) are a unique experiment in radical urban planning, whereby beneficiary communities map their own water and sanitation needs and help to plan infrastructure development, which is financed by the state. Thanks to heavy state investment in water and sanitation infrastructure and this participatory methodology, Venezuela now has 96% coverage in potable water, one of the highest rates in the region. Victor Díaz was part of a team of reformers who were working in HIDROCAPITAL (the state-owned and operated water and sanitation that serves the federal district of Caracas) under the mayorship of Aristóbulo Istúriz (1993-1996). Many of the original team members have since gone on to hold major positions in the Chávez government. In this interview, Victor talks about the accomplishments in the water and sanitation sector, including the meaning of socialism, the importance of popular power and political support, as well as the challenges that remain.

Rebecca McMillan and Susan Spronk: Can you tell us about your political history and your role in HIDROCAPITAL?

Victor Díaz: I studied geography in the Universidad Central de Venezuela in the 1980s, a time when the student movement was very active. As a student I met a group of people who believed in popular power and we worked to make it a reality in HIDROCAPITAL. Today, I am the Community Coordinator of HIDROCAPITAL in the Caracas metropolitan area, which is the capital region. I have been with the company for 13 years, and before that I worked in politics, mostly in the parishes Antímano and 23 de Enero [poor neighbourhoods in Caracas].

I think that the secret of our success is that the team of people involved in the reforms have long identified with the idea of transferring power to the people. It isn’t just rhetoric. Our commitment began in the universities in the 1980s with the movement to democratize the universities through student participation. And now the same commitment to participation is
reflected in all of the government’s proposals. The leaders know that if the directors don’t have a clear understanding and commitment to participation, then a proposal is not going to last, because you cannot force proposals on people. It never works to do things by decree.

RM and SS: How did the mesas técnicas de agua come about, and what has been your involvement?

VD: It all began under the mayorship of Professor Aristóbulo Istúriz in 1993-1996 [1]. Under Aristóbulo, the city was experimenting with new forms of local government, which in some ways gave birth to current urban processes, particularly in Caracas. The administration of Aristóbulo Istúriz formed city-level working groups to look at various issues, both social and technical. It was the first progressive experiment we had had in many years. This was in the midst of the government of the 4th Republic, during the second mandate of President Caldera (1994-1999), which supported a diagnostic study of the city’s problems. The diagnoses contributed to policy proposals to address the problems – some of which were solved successfully at that time, and some of which laid dormant until Chávez came to power in 1999.

I was working in public services at this time. As mayor, Aristóbulo created the Municipal Services Corporation (Corporacion de Servicios Municipales, CSM), a decentralized entity that coordinated infrastructure planning and development. The CSM worked on expanding infrastructure everywhere in Caracas, until the last barrio. Here we also piloted the participatory methodology that we use today. We went into the barrios and diagnosed their situation – exposure to risk, how public services were being delivered, etc. At that time there was no help for the barrios coming from the government. The diagnoses led to the creation of participatory mechanisms with the people, and to the adoption of some very localized solutions, for example, in the parishes of Antímano and Junquito.

The water situation in these parishes was very critical because of their high altitude. The average altitude in the city is between 800 and 100 meters, but many of the popular neighbourhoods are even higher. This makes it very difficult to supply them with services, particularly drinking water, and it requires considerable community participation.
In Caracas we face considerable challenges providing potable water since the city is located above its principal water source. In a logically organized system, the water source should be located above the city so that water can be transported by gravity, and you waste less energy. In Caracas, it's the total opposite. Due to this scarcity, there were serious problems in the surrounding areas, particularly towards the west of the city. From 1990-1994 there were many social conflicts and protests due to the water problems.

Under Aristóbulo, the municipal government created a participatory model in Caracas, called the ‘parish government’ (gobierno parroquial), which involved the participation of all of the sectors of the parish to seek solutions to the city’s problems, including water. The government identified four major parishes, which had serious water service problems: Antímano, Junquito, El Valle, and la Vega [poor neighbourhoods in Caracas]. This model of “government of the people,” as it was called, led to the formation of the mesas técnicas de agua, (Technical Water Fora, MTAs).

Aristóbulo led a team of reformers in implementing the model, including Jacqueline Faría then manager of Caracas’s water system for HIDROCAPITAL, as well as other comrades in the company. Despite the considerable ideological differences between the administration of President Caldera and Aristóbulo, Aristóbulo approached the central government to seek their collaboration in solving the water problem. His proposals encountered opposition from the authorities, including many in HIDROCAPITAL, but the ‘rapprochement’ between the municipal government and some progressive-minded people in the central administration allowed them to overcome this opposition and advance their proposals. Also, Aristóbulo’s work with the parish governments and the MTAs took pressure off the central government to solve the problem. In the end, the work went forward with the cooperation of HIDROCAPITAL.

They performed general diagnostic studies of the sectors, especially Antímano and Junquito. At that time, people in these parishes received water 8 times per year at most – that’s every two months! It was a serious problem. So they developed a temporary strategy with the participation of the neighbourhood to develop a schedule of water delivery by tanker truck. When the piped water would arrive to one sector, the tanker would deliver water to the other sector, and so on. At first, however, the MTAs were primarily information-sharing sessions [rather than decision-making assemblies, as they are envisioned now]. They then initiated a water main project to improve the piped service.
In 1995, Aristóbulo Istúriz lost the election [in the largest municipality within the Capital District, Libertador de Caracas] to the right wing candidate, Antonio Ledezma (1996-2000). Before the end of his term, they made a push to finish the water main and they succeed in finishing it in early 1995. As a result, there was a significant increase in the supply of water to the communities who went from receiving water every 2 months to receiving it every 10 days. The people were satisfied, but unfortunately this was not reflected in the votes, since the level of political consciousness was low. There were also many conflicts between Aristóbulo’s party Causa-R (Radical Cause), and his government [2].

As soon as Ledezma took office, he dismantled the parroquia and MTA initiatives. Of course, the right wing doesn’t care if the popular sectors improve their situation. Many projects laid dormant until Chavez’s election in 1998. Under Chávez, the central government revived Aristóbulo’s proposal and the national government took over the management of water mains. Many people from Aristóbulo’s team found work in the central government, including in HIDROCAPITAL, and they spearheaded this work. Jacqueline Faría was named president of HIDROCAPITAL and a committee was formed to implement Aristóbulo’s MTA model. This time there was much more political support, a coherent strategy, and more emphasis on popular participation.

RM and SS: Can you explain some of the principle achievements in the water and sanitation sector since 1999?

VD: One achievement was surpassing the Millennium Development Goals. Not only did we achieve the MDG before the 2015 deadline but we have also gone above and beyond the MDG standards for water supply. According to the MDGs, a household has ‘water access’ when there is a water source within 300m of the community. In Venezuela, we have supplied piped water directly to people’s homes.

In 1999, the percentage of people with water supply was 85% and now it is 96%, which was very significant. Most of the remaining 4% of people who do not have access to piped water live in rural areas or indigenous communities. There are also a few communities in Caracas who lack access in Carretera Vía de los Teques, between Matadero and La Lomita. Currently, these people use mountain water or get water from tankers. HIDROCAPITAL and the municipal...
government are digging a well to supply these households with piped water.

Another achievement is the organization of the communities. Right now, we have an estimated 9,000 MTAs across the country. One of our comrades, Francisco Cobral, says that the MTAs are practically a political party. If we estimate 10 people per MTAs, the MTAs have almost 90,000 members! At any given moment there may only be an average of five people attending meetings regularly, but there’s an important relationship being developed with the people.

The other achievement is that the MTAs are building capacity to be a planning entity under the consejos comunales (Communal Councils, CCs). The MTAs play a role in providing information about the community to the CCs, such as skills in diagnostics, inspections, training of community members, etc. These are the kinds of skills that CCs need.

Another important achievement is the investment in infrastructure through a participatory planning process through the MTAs. We now have a very important plan for Caracas called Plan Agua, which goes until 2014. They are now building feeder pipes to improve the service in the popular sectors, where there hasn’t been investment in years. In some sectors, the two-month water cycles have been reduced to 20 days. In La Vega, for example, where people currently receive water every 8-10 days, people will soon have daily access. The construction of Tuy IV, the new water reservoir, is also part of the plan to improve the city’s water service.

RM and SS: Can you clarify the relationship between the municipality, HIDROCAPITAL, the MTAs, and the Communal Councils?

VD: HIDROCAPITAL’s relationship with the people has two essential components: the MTAs and the participatory methodology, which consists of a census of the community and a participatory mapping of its water problems. That’s the approach we used when we hit the ground running in 1999, and now all of the MTAs have to follow these steps. Chavez later adopted the MTA methodology for the consejos comunales. The MTAs fall under the consejos comunales,
the umbrella organization, which encompasses all of the local participatory structures.

Around 2006-2007, a new structure was created: the consejo comunitario de agua (Community Water Councils, CCA). The CCAs were created because it was very difficult to meet with each MTA individually. We meet with them when they are first being formed, but it is difficult in the long run because there are so many. At the time when the CCA was adopted, HIDROCAPITAL only had five community coordinators. Now we have a staff of 10, but this is still not enough. There are 22 parishes in the municipality of Libertador and 32 in the entire metropolitan area. Each coordinator is responsible for as many as 4 or 6 parishes. So we needed to create a structure where various MTAs from the same water supply system or watershed could come together. For example, the same pipes deliver water to both Junquito and the upper part of Antímano so we meet with them together.

With respect to the municipality – the municipalities have never faced up to the problem of water and sanitation. There are very few municipalities in the country that prioritize water. I don’t know why. So we, the state, have taken it upon ourselves. Even though it is a constitutional directive, we, the state, basically take responsibility [3].

Aristóbulo was an exception. He threw himself into the question of water, even in a city as complicated as Caracas. Very few of Caracas’s mayors have emphasized water, of all of the problems in Caracas. I am probably coming across as an Aristobulista [supporter of Aristóbulo], and I am. Aristóbulo knew everything that was going on in the city. People would tell him everything. There are also things being done now with Jorge [Jorge Rodríguez, the current mayor of the municipality of Libertador, part of Caracas], e.g. the cemetery and the work in Antímano, which were originally Professor Aristóbulo’s proposals. Back then the investment that was needed was too big. It wasn’t possible when we didn’t have the control over our principal source of wealth (oil).

Compañeros in other countries struggling for water do not have the same political support that we do in Venezuela. In Colombia, for example, they had to have a referendum to fight for the human right to water and for the reduction in water tariffs. Our compañeros in Colombia had to go all around the country soliciting signatures and even seek support at the international level [4]. It’s the same in other countries such as Bolivia with the major problems in Cochabamba still ongoing. On the other hand, here, for better or for worse, we’ve had a [political] response and
the oil revenues have allowed us to achieve significant levels of access.

RM and SS: Since 2005, Chavez has been talking about socialism. In your opinion, what does socialism mean with respect to water and sanitation?

VD: As a concept, I think it means equal services for everyone. If there is water in the centre of Caracas 24-hours a day, why isn't there water in the more remote sectors? It should be the same for everyone. If we could do it, then why couldn't those jerks (carajos) do it before? It was because they were not interested in doing it. They wanted to turn water supply into a capitalist means of production. That's why they didn't do it. What we are doing now in HIDROCAPITAL is very difficult, but it is possible. The technical structure here hasn't changed very much, but the politics and the approach to designing the system have.

In the parts of the city where there is urban planning and legal title, it is easy to supply water. All you have to do is install the pipes. All of the middle and upper class neighbourhoods (urbanizaciones) in the east of Caracas built their system with petroleum money. They built these big urbanizaciones and well organized pipes but it wasn't like that in the west. Obviously it was much easier to supply water in the east. Now we are installing pipes in the west and we are working with the people to replace their networks. The Plan Agua now has 22 community projects, where people participate in improving the infrastructure.

So to answer your question, I think socialism means equal quality of services for everyone, without exclusion. We haven't taken a single drop of water away from the sectors that have always had water.

RM and SS: What major challenges remain in sanitation (water treatment and sewerage)?
VD: Recently we face considerable challenges with climate change. We have had critical climatic periods, including two major droughts. We need to come up with some kind of plan, because if there are people in Junquito who have water every 20 days and you have water every day, then during a drought I should be able to take water away from you to send it to those who don’t have any. In the wealthier parts of the city, there are very large water storage tanks on the buildings, which helps them deal with the drought.

In Caracas, we have a project for the clean up of the Rio Guaire – the principal river in Caracas. However, the timeframe that was initially proposed for the project was very ambitious because it is a very complicated endeavour. There are already large sewerage collectors along the Rio Guaire, but many people don’t even know they exist. They have mostly fallen into disuse. When we work on sewerage projects, we aim to ensure that the wastewater ends up in collectors and not in the Guaire, but it is difficult, especially collecting wastewater in the highest parts of the barrios. There has been some progress in improving sanitation, but it’s a challenge that, in my opinion, will take 20 years.

RM and SS: How do you approach household sanitation? What does HIDROCAPITAL consider to be appropriate sanitation technology?

VD: We only focus on networked, water-borne sewerage connections. Septic tanks haven’t worked because they destabilize the soil in communities that are on steep slopes. For example, in Hoyo de la Puerta, where they relied on septic tanks, there was a landslide. The septic system was originally designed for 9 sectors and now there are 25, almost tripling the population. At that time it was and continues to be a sector that is controlled by the opposition. Now, the people want to take on the design and resolution of the problem.

There have also been experiments with dry toilets in La Vega, but they were not successful, mainly for cultural reasons. People are used to getting rid of their waste using water so that they do not have to think about it.
RM and SS: Can you talk about issues of informality? For example, in some countries the state utilities can’t enter neighbourhoods where people don’t have title to their land.

VD: In Venezuela, it’s the same. They are trying to resolve this through the new property laws [5]. In my opinion, it is impossible to tell people who have lived in an area for a number of years that they have to leave their land. This is why we are starting to give people title to their land. I think this is reasonable, no? If the people have always lived there, it’s logical for them to have rights over their land.

The proposal suggests that a household might have individual title over their property, but that the community also have some form of collective control. In other words, the plot can belong to an individual family, but the property is collective in the sense that people can’t sell their plot, putting their neighbour at risk. This was the plan in Castellano in the barrio of La Pedregada, but when the proposal was put forth, they tried to sell their plots individually. They had an individual, capitalist vision of the development of the land.

RM and SS: Can you talk a little bit about the role of the union in HIDROCAPITAL?

VD: The elements of the union within the water company that identify with the opposition have been ‘neutralized’ because they do not have support from the other workers. Here in HIDROCAPITAL when we began [referring to the change team led by Victor Díaz and others], many workers, including members of my unit, were affiliated with the union. I, personally, opposed the proposal to affiliate because the job of my unit was to bring proposals to the management and we would come into direct conflict with other unionized workers. Now that things have changed [under Chávez], we have promoted workers’ councils. Here we’ve had some disagreements because water tariffs were frozen for six years, which of course had repercussions for the company’s ability to invest. They reduced many of the maintenance personnel. Where the investment hasn’t been reduced is in the production of the service. We had to make sure to pay the electricity, because without that you can’t pump the water. Sometimes we weren’t able to pay the electricity, but since it’s also state run it’s better not to pay the electricity than other things. There were many discussions with the electric utility and they would agree not to cut off the power because water is also a vital service.
Last year there was a small increase in water tariffs, and now we can pay the electricity. The first priority is to provide service, and then take care of the salaries of the workers. We have always looked at all of the alternatives. And now things with the workers are improving, there’s been a salary adjustment. I think the model has achieved good results.

Notes

[1] Aristóbulo Istúriz was a high school teacher before he entered politics.

[2] Despite its name, Causa-R was never a “radical” party, but rather considered left only in comparison to the governing party at the time, the Christian Democratic Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (Political Electoral Independent Organization Committee, COPEI). Causa-R has since shifted further right when progressives from the party split off to form Patria Para Todos (Fatherland for All, PPT) in 1997. Causa-R is now part of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD), which is running against the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party, PSUV) in the national elections which will take place on October 7, 2012. Patria Para Todos is part of the Gran Polo Patriotico (GPP), the coalition which supports Hugo Chávez.

[3] Article 156 of the 1999 Constitution designates the Capital District as jurisdiction of the national government. the Federal District as the jurisdiction of the national government. In 2009, the Federal District was renamed the ‘Capital District’ and additional functions were transferred from the municipal government to national government through the creation of the Head of Government for Capital District. Public works in Caracas are the jurisdiction of the latter.
Colombia has one of the highest rates of water privatization in Latin America. There are over 125 private and public-private companies operating water and sanitation services in Colombia. Between 2007 and 2010, Ecofondo – a network of environmental, human rights and indigenous groups – organized a campaign for a referendum to introduce a constitutional right to water and to oppose water privatization in Colombia. The proposed constitutional amendment would have guaranteed a minimum amount of free public water, public management of water resources, and special measures to protect ecosystems critical to the water supply. Ultimately the referendum proposal was defeated by the Colombian congress, despite the fact that the movement had obtained the required number of signatures.

Presidential Decree 1666, passed in February 2002, has made it easier for Venezuelans living in the barrios to acquire legal titles to their homes.

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