



# Participatory Practices: Learning From Experience\*

PN-ABZ-559

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### *PROMOTING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN MUNICIPAL SERVICES*

*Potable Water Project in Matagalpa, Nicaragua*<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Problem**

In March 1991, the Municipality of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, reached an agreement with the national water authority to allow the municipality to assume administration of the municipal water system. This would be the nation's first experiment with decentralization of a utility service. Soon, however, the success of the experiment was jeopardized by low public support for the new system.

Under the pilot agreement, a local water authority, *Acueductos y Alcantarillados de Matagalpa* (AyAMAT) was established and a series of physical and administrative improvements to the antiquated and neglected system were put into place. AyAMAT also designed an ambitious, multi-phased Matagalpa Potable Water Project, calling for the construction of additional dams, water holding facilities, and water delivery channels to address critical water shortage problems.

A municipal bond program was established to help finance the project. In addition, a compensation program in which laborers helped dig trenches and lay pipe offered workers 60 percent of their wages in cash and 40 percent in a municipal bond, which could be held for investment or used to buy a connection to the water service. Nonetheless, the level of community participation in these programs was well below what was desired to make the

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USAID PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE is a series studies of participatory approaches in USAID programs. They are intended to help staff consider similar approaches and share experiences. USAID's Participation Forum and GP-NET, an electronic conversation group, enable development practitioners worldwide to discuss problems and successes in the use of participation. For further information please E-mail Diane La Voy (DLAVOY@USAID.GOV) or Wendy Kapustin (WKAPUSTIN@USAID.GOV).

*Steven Dorsey drafted this summary, which is a synopsis of a USAID funded study published in July 1995 by the Regional Information Clearinghouse (RIC) at USAID/Guatemala-Central American Programs, authored by Sharon Van Pelt, RIC Consultant.*

project viable. After nearly two years, only 260 bonds with a total value of \$25,000 had been sold, and only 150 Matagalpan laborers had participated in the compensation program.

In 1993, a USAID-funded external consultant conducted an evaluation of the newly decentralized water service and provided recommendations for the Potable Water Project. One of the recommendations of the evaluator was that the municipality needed to communicate better with the community in order to ensure greater community participation.

### **The Practice and its Results: Promotional Water Campaign**

At the request of Municipal officials, staff of the Regional Information Clearinghouse (RIC) in USAID/Guatemala visited with Municipal officials, AyAMAT officials, and community leaders in June and September 1994. After assessing existing municipal efforts to elicit community support and participation in the water project, RIC staff concluded that a much more focused and intensive effort, using various and innovative means of communication, would be necessary to significantly increase participation. It was felt that the Municipality had not yet succeeded in instilling in the community a sense of ownership of and responsibility for the water system and the Potable Water Project.

In collaboration with the Mayor of Matagalpa and his staff, the RIC staff assisted Municipal officials in the design of a series of activities that, as a whole, would constitute an intensive, six-month effort to launch a campaign to encourage greater community support and participation. The campaign's objectives were to raise awareness among the municipal population of the problems being faced in the delivery of the water service, and, by strengthening demand for municipal bonds, to improve the level of cost recovery for the water service and new projects.

Among the activities conducted from February to August 1995 were the following:

#### **\*Informational Flyers\***

RIC staff noted AyAMAT's efficient billing system, and recommended that the municipality take advantage of the monthly delivery of water bills to all residents connected to the water system (approximately 8,000 households) by including with the bills informational flyers with important messages about the water service.

This type of effort is common practice among utility service providers in the United States. While the municipality was not in the financial position to produce glossy, full color inserts for the water bills, it could reproduce attractive and innovative inserts to help disseminate important messages. RIC staff demonstrated this practice to the municipality by designing and producing the first two inserts, in consultation with municipal officials, who were subsequently trained to produce future inserts.

The first insert focused on the municipal bond program as an economical and effective means of community participation in the Potable Water Project. The principal message was that "the problem of potable water is everyone's problem and together we can solve it." Information was provided on the municipal bond program and citizens were encouraged to buy bonds. The second insert listed and illustrated recommendations for simple water conservation measures such as restricting the use of free flowing hoses for washing cars and watering plants. The municipality will continue to issue further flyers on different subjects as the need arises.

### **\*Meeting of Community Leaders\***

In March 1995, the municipality called a meeting of the 165 "auxiliary mayors" or community leaders, who are chosen by the mayor to represent the various communities within the municipality. This was the first overture to these important community leaders specifically on the Potable Water Project.

Community leaders were informed in detail about the water project and the planned promotional campaign, and their support was sought in disseminating these themes in their respective communities. Their input on both the bond and compensation programs was sought, as well as their input on the overall aims and direction of the Potable Water Project. The RIC assisted in this activity by helping to prepare the meeting's agenda and preparing hand-outs on the water project and the promotional campaign for participants.

These community leaders were seen as the most effective and efficient means of reaching the wider population with messages about the Potable Water Project. If these leaders could be convinced that greater participation in the bond program and work program would both benefit the Project and their constituents, they could become on-the-ground catalysts for participation in their neighborhoods.

### **\*Student Poster Contest\***

In May 1995, the municipality sponsored a poster contest in the secondary schools of Matagalpa in order to extend the message about the Potable Water Project further into the community. Students were asked to create a logo and or a slogan on "The Importance of Water and its Conservation." The logo and slogan were seen as essential to create wider recognition of and identification with the Project and its messages.

All future publicity materials would incorporate the logo and slogan. Local businesses were contacted to donate prizes and provide judges for the contests. The municipality also included contests for best water game, dance, essay, play, song, parade float and water queen.

The RIC assisted in the development of contest rules and the design and production of an announcement poster that was placed throughout local schools and businesses. The eleven directors of local secondary schools and the Departmental Representative from the Ministry of

Education came together on their own accord to form a Steering Committee for these activities. The Mayor, the Director of AyAMAT and the Director of the River Basin Protection Project, visited each school in May 1995 to provide students with an overview of the water situation, answer questions, and promote student participation in upcoming events.

### **\*Municipal Water Week\***

The climactic event of the campaign was held in June 1995; the municipality held a Municipal Water Week with public events each day. The municipality chose the week of June 5-9 as Municipal Water Week and scheduled the presentation and judging of various student contests each evening in the local theater. All events were open to the public.

Four large banners announcing the events of the week were strategically placed above the main streets of Matagalpa. The events were promoted on the municipal radio station in the weeks prior to Water Week, an article was written in the national newspaper La Prensa and the events themselves were broadcast live on the municipal radio station as well as the Catholic radio station.

On the final day of the week, the secondary schools decorated their water "floats," which carried their Water Queens in a parade through the city. The winners of the various contests, including best float and Municipal Water Queen and Court, were presented with prizes. The large theater where the event was held was filled to capacity with many standing in the rear due to lack of space. Those in attendance included students, school officials and teachers, municipal officials, families, religious, political party and community leaders and reporters. A large segment of the community was brought together to focus on a single concern of importance to all.

Many who attended the event responded positively to informal questions about how all of the preceding efforts had helped them better understand the municipal water problem and how they could now become involved in its resolution.

### **\*On-going efforts\***

To encourage continuity, the winning poster and slogan design from the student contests was used as the basis for design of a full-color campaign poster to be displayed throughout the municipality in order to introduce the new logo and slogan for the municipal water service. The winning poster consists of an anthropomorphic water drop presenting the following slogan: "Matagalpino! Agua, salud y vida. Es nuestra alternativa." [Matagalpan! Water, health and life. It's our choice.] This poster presents a short and visual message and it is hoped that through this and additional posters, which will also incorporate the logo and slogan, greater awareness of the problems and support for their solution will be generated.

Additionally, municipal officials planned to record the various songs composed by students and play them on the municipal radio station as part of the on-going campaign. Finally,

municipal officials have now declared the first week in June each year as Municipal Water Week, and similar events will be held on an annual basis.

## **Discussion Points**

Promoting greater communication between municipal officials and the larger municipal community promotes greater civic involvement at the local level. Among important points to consider in the design of such efforts are the following lessons from the above campaign:

- 1) Communication needs to be two-way. Some of the activities of this campaign were designed to disseminate information, such as the water bill inserts. Others were designed also to answer questions and solicit input on the Potable Water Project and related municipal programs, such as the meetings with community leaders.
- 2) Starting with and integrally involving the youth lent a very positive energy to this campaign. The enthusiasm of the youth, who as part of the school community have an active sense of civic pride, was contagious. Schools have the institutional capacity to initiate and carry out community based activities and encourage the youth to participate. Beginning with youth can introduce a potentially politically sensitive issue as a technical and community problem, rather than opening up a political debate at the outset.
- 3) In implementing this approach, the RIC sought to achieve two objectives that sometimes entail trade-offs: ensuring "ownership" of the communications campaign by municipal and school officials and community leaders, and, training municipal officials in the design and implementation of such efforts. To achieve the latter, the RIC insisted on working closely with the officials at every stage of the campaign. That the logo and slogan representing the campaign were designed by a local youth reinforced community ownership of the campaign and the water service itself.
- 4) The intensity of the campaign was deemed important for overcoming a profound lack of awareness in the community of the severity of the water problem and the successes thus far of the municipal water service. It was also important to draw out many who harbored deep and historical political suspicions about municipal authorities and their abuses of power. The activities of the campaign were not restricted to any one section of the municipality or any one political grouping. Instead, everyone was encouraged to become better informed and to share concerns and insights with municipal authorities. Bringing this issue to the attention of the community in such an intensive manner encouraged greater openness in discussions and transparency in the administration and planning of the water service.
- 5) Providing various avenues for communication and participation reaches and can engage a wide audience. The local radio and cable television spots, informational flyers, posters, and songs were all effective means used to encourage and promote community action and involvement.

