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## Aguacatán in Guatemala: how seven communities joined hands

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### • Introduction

In 1994 the support team from SER<sup>1</sup>, began a process of Participatory Action Research to improve water management in seven communities within the municipality of Aguacatán three hours from Quetzaltenango, where SER is located. At the start of this process, the community leaders asked us: *'Do you have financing to fix our project? Can you give us pipes to improve the flow?'* The directors of institutions such as UNEPAR, the main governmental body involved in providing water and sanitation throughout the country, with whom SER had co-ordinated, also doubted our ability to improve water management of the communities. More importantly, they doubted the effectiveness of a process of this nature. To be honest, each member of our team also had doubts. However, as will become clear below, five years later the approach had proven such a success that local government and other nearby communities are interested in adopting such a process themselves.

### • The background to SER's involvement

To get to Aguacatán from the capital, one must cover 305 kilometres. This municipality is made up of 49 rural communities. Seven of these, Chex, Chichoche, Tucuná, Aguacatán

Canton, Patzalam, Agua Blanca and Río Blanco, are home to 550 families (3600 inhabitants), see Figure 1.

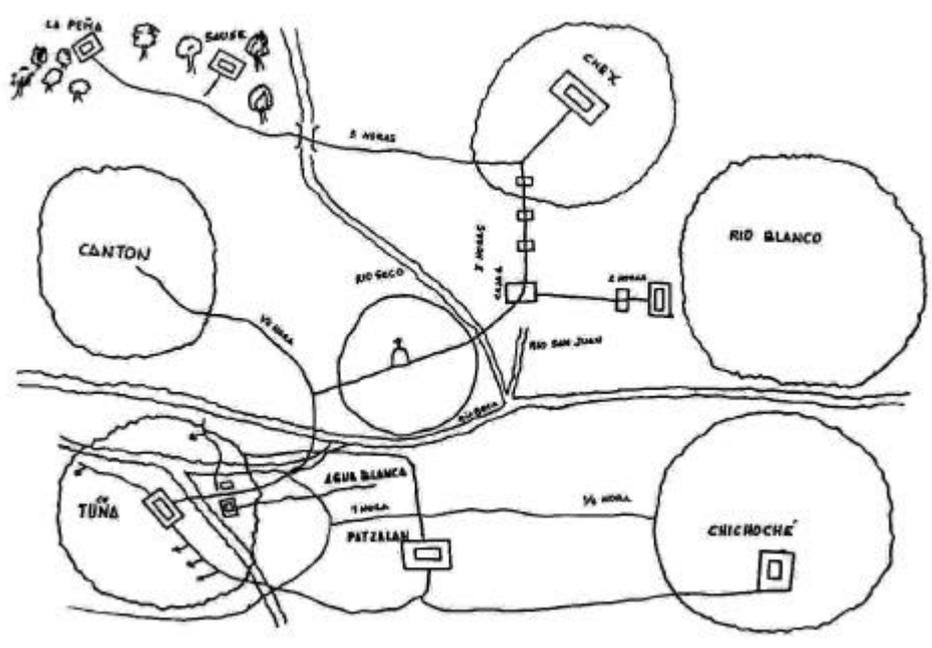
Until 1986, long before SER's involvement, these seven communities did not have a potable water system. The women and children would get water from the rivers, streams and home-made wells in the area, running many risks because of the steep ravines and swift currents. They spent three hours every day bringing water back to their homes. The water was of poor quality, and consequently the children in particular developed various disorders, such as diarrhoea, vomiting, stomach aches, headaches and dehydration. Without health services at their disposal or the financial means to pay for a doctor, many children died.

For five years they solicited several governmental institutions, but these did not respond. They then found the support of an NGO called Agua del Pueblo (ADP)<sup>2</sup>, who made the initial studies and budget. The president of the Patzalam committee recounted the process: *'We in Patzalam began looking for an institution that would help us bring water from Pericón. Since it was very expensive, we thought that it would be better to speak with other communities to do one single project for everyone. That was how Tucuna Chex, El Cantón and the other communities got involved. That was the hardest thing about this project.'*

<sup>1</sup> Servicios del Desarrollo (SER) is a non-governmental organisation that works towards developing and transferring participatory methodologies in development programmes, including water projects.

<sup>2</sup> Water of the People

Figure 1. Map drawn by villagers of participating communities



The leaders of the other communities held assemblies. The seven communities realised that they had the same problem and that the water source could supply them all. They also realised the many advantages of working together.

- The project would be cheaper.
- There would be more manpower for the construction.
- The labour could be divided into operation, maintenance and improvement when the system was finished.

Then they decided to do one single project for all seven communities, taking advantage of the same water source, as well as the financial resources and technicians from the institution that was going to support them.

Seven local committees were then organised, one in each community. With two representatives from each committee, a general assembly of 'associates' was formed. Also, a Central Council was elected, initially devised only to co-ordinate the project's execution.

### A participatory process

Fourteen years after being built, and after eleven years of serious technical and administrative problems with the supplying of

water in Aguacatán, the PAR support team, came to this group of seven communities. The type of issues the communities were facing fit well into the process of the PAR project we wanted to start to improve community water management. We presented the PAR project and discussed it with the Central Council of the association of water projects in the seven communities of Aguacatán – APAGUA. At first, incredulity reigned because they saw us as outsiders from yet another institution that came offering 'stuff.' They were also suspicious since there were many paramilitary groups in the region that used any pretext to obtain information about the community. We began the process with a few community leaders that were willing to try. Along the way, other community leaders got involved; still later, the community members themselves became protagonists. This passage from 'spectators' to 'actors' occurred only when they saw that the meetings, assemblies and discussions, which initially seemed like a waste of time, took on life and showed results. After 'selling' the research project to the communities, we defined and discussed with the village committee the selection of local research teams in each community. Together with the local research team, we began the diagnosing phase.



project and provided a loan to the communities to improve their water supply system.

With regard to the strengthening of community management, committees were trained in the basics of water engineering, such as extension of services, reduction of flows, interpreting basic blueprints and basic rural hydraulics. The committees were also trained in administration, accounting and the use of economic resources. A suitable fee structure was established, and a professional accountant was hired to keep records of financial and material resources and to establish regulations and control mechanisms. All of these decisions were taken in consultation with the community assembly. Many of the decisions were taken by consensus.

### **What can be achieved through the community's own knowledge and resources**

In Aguacatan, the earlier water supply system, which cost US\$140,625, had not provided the seven communities with water. Broken pipes and lack of maintenance were the key problems quoted by the villagers. After heated discussions facilitated by the Local Research Team the communities and their leaders began working together. The seven communities elected water committees, which in turn formed a general co-ordinating committee. Through this process the community members, organisations and leaders participated and made decisions about the water management. They managed to organise the operation and maintenance of the water system. They divided the 17 kilometres of connection line from the source to the villages in seven parts, each part being the responsibility of one community. The collection of the water fee system was improved and made more transparent. The communities agreed to paying additional fees for repairs on top of the annual fee, as long as they would regularly be informed on what the money was spent. For those people not paying the fee a system of sanctions was introduced. In this whole learning process, once the PAR-Manage project was in place, they could always get help from us, the support team from SER

Now, the community takes advantage of the new system and manages it, but also continues utilising its different water sources – wells,

rivers, streams -to wash clothes, irrigate crops and water their animals. They do this in accordance with their own agreements, some of which are established in the regulations

As a result of the learning process, the community elders now act as advisors to the water committee. The community assembly continues to be a mechanism for consultation, discussion and collective decision making. The experience and training that the leaders have received from SER in accounting, organisation and water engineering now constitute the basis for permanently maintaining a water service of high enough quality for human consumption.

The process has given legitimacy to the community's operating norms, which now have more validity and support. These norms are complied with, not because they are written down, but because the community members themselves have defined them. The oral tradition is highly respected by the community members themselves. Social pressure is an indispensable element for proper control and management of water. The leaders have also established some formal mechanisms to keep track of and follow through on planned activities. Many of these mechanisms work by means of visits by the leaders, meetings and community assemblies.

One of the biggest achievements has been the use of participatory methodologies and tools. The leaders not only apply these to water management, but also in other community development work. An ex-council member and current worker in the local co-operative provides just such a case: *'I was given work in the co-operative because they say that I can handle participatory techniques to work with people.'*

### **Making a community business of the supply of water**

With regard to the water project, the leaders and associates consider some basic ideas important.

- The project is the community's; that means there exists an idea of ownership.
- It is not acceptable that the municipality assumes responsibility for this service.
- There is a desire to continue managing the project.

- Management implies expenses that must be charged to the associates.
- The capacity of APAGUA must be improved.

From these ideas came the initiative to institutionalise the water service; that is, to make it run as a 'business.' To do this, APAGUA now has land and a local headquarters where its office currently functions with minimal equipment – desks, blackboards, benches etc., and water engineering equipment. A general co-ordinator and an accountant have also been established as paid staff.

Although no one specifically posed the idea of a community business, it arose as part of the project's activities. Some council members did not think it was a good idea because the associates might have interpreted it as business profitable only to the leaders. The leaders' idea, however, was to *'have a business directed by the community members themselves to permanently provide themselves with sufficient high-quality water at the lowest cost possible.'*

#### • **Additional accomplishments of the project**

With the improved management capability, APAGUA could move beyond their role of supplying water and promote 'Integral Community Development' projects benefiting the associate communities.

APAGUA has been invited by the Public Health Ministry to present its experience before the directors of all the institutions in the country's water sector. Also, the neighbouring communities have solicited support from APAGUA to train other committees and follow the process of water management.

The municipality of Aguacatán and other communities have asked the SER support team to help with other processes, using the experience with the seven communities in Aguacatán as a base. APAGUA currently has co-operation agreements with two other institutions; a Housing Cooperative and *Asociación de Desarrollo Integral de Aguacatán (ASDIA)*, to help plan and improve water management.

The committee of APAGUA also negotiated a contract with a regional development corporation to start a programme of reforestation both for water conservation and to reduce soil erosion. The co-ordination of activities between the different water systems in the area has been one of the biggest successes.

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