

# From our water correspondent

*Water committees have a strong track record of sustainable water system management in rural Latin America. This report from our water correspondent describes the formation of a Latin American confederation of Community-Managed Water Systems, to encourage learning and support for this model.*

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In Paraguay the banks provide credit to water committees for repairs or expansions

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ELISADA IS NOT YOUR AVERAGE water committee president. For starters, she is a woman in charge – not a common phenomenon in rural Peru. And a weak woman she is not; she runs the water system in her community not as a voluntary afterthought, but in her own words, as a business run by community members.

We are at the second Summit of Water Committee Representatives in Cusco, Peru, and Elisada is one of four powerful women opening the event. Recounting one of the more difficult tasks she has been charged with, that of cutting off service to a non-paying user, who also happened to be her daughter, I can't help but think that if more water committees had people like Elisada in charge, we would be a small step closer to solving the global water crisis.

Or if more countries were successful in organizing community-based water management into national-level networks, as in the case of Paraguay, perhaps we would start to see some of the benefits of economies of scale that we will never see with individually managed water systems. FEPAJUS, the National Association of Water Committees, has successfully negotiated credit agreements with banks to provide credit to water committees when repairs or expansions are beyond their capabilities. Difficult to do when only one water committee is interested, but when hundreds are associated into an umbrella organization, their collective voice is much louder.

I attended another meeting several years ago at which one of the panels was discussing whether or not the concept of community-managed water systems was dead. While I found the debate interesting at the time and continue to wrestle with the challenges of sustainable water system management, be it public, private, cooperative, or community-based, what struck me during the most recent meeting in Cusco was that the nearly 80,000 community-managed

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water boards, committees, or associations serve – conservatively – over 40 million people in the Latin American region. Second only to large utilities who serve urban populations, the water board is not going anywhere anytime soon in Latin America.

Water systems – whether they follow a public, private, cooperative, or community-managed model – can be well managed or poorly managed. Each management model has its advantages and disadvantages depending on the circumstances under which the system will be managed. What became increasingly clear at the event in Cusco was that the power of associations could be a key strategy in sustainable water service management.

More than 500 people representing 14 countries are present at the event.

One of the goals of the meeting in Cusco is to explore the possibility of a regional association of water committees. Many countries in the region have very powerful associations of irrigation committees whose voices are heard at the national level and influence the development of sector policies, watershed management, and

tariff-setting. Absent from many of those conversations is the voice of the user for consumption because there are very few national-level voices of the water committee.

After three days of presentations, debates, and working groups, the dynamic leaders from the region decide to form a regional network of water committees. Based in part on the success of networks at other levels in countries in the region, the potential to share lessons learned, and provide technical assistance to other networks, the Latin American Confederation of Community-Managed Water Systems is formed.

Challenges are many in sustaining this and other networks; if it cannot be self-sustaining there is no chance it will last. But if the success of some of the national and local networks in the region are any indication of what can be done, I am confident that these leaders will be able to replicate the successes in Paraguay with accessing credit for water committees or the advocacy in Peru for micro-metering, or the monitoring systems being developed in Bolivia, across the region.

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The power of associations can be a key strategy in sustainable water service management

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