

From our water correspondent

Bolivia led the charge at the UN for water to be adopted as a human right

BOLIVIA LED THE CHARGE at the United Nations for water to be adopted as a human right in 2010 after officially including the right to water in its revised constitution in 2009. After the years of debate on whether or not to make water a right, according to reports from the most recent World Water Forum, it seems – at the macro level anyway – that the discussion has moved from the ‘right or no right’ debate to how does one actually operationalize that right.

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High in the altiplano of Bolivia, a conversation is happening far from the halls of the United Nations and the conference centre in Marseilles. I can’t help but wonder what Evo Morales, the President of Bolivia, might think about the discussion we were having, as it demonstrates how complicated it is putting things like rights to water into practice.

We are in the community of Boqueron Alto, the reigning champion of the annual water committee competition in this municipality of over 140 rural communities. Several years ago, with co-financing from the community members themselves, the local government, and Water For People, an improved gravity-fed

system was built, providing water to nearly 200 rural Bolivians. They manage three separate income streams: funds raised from tariffs; another for funds raised from new connections; and a third from fines that are imposed when people show up late to water committee meetings! They see the value in growing their capital, and loan 500 Bolivianos (about US\$70) to each member per year, and charge 20 per cent interest, meaning that each person returns 600 Bolivianos to the fund at the end of the year. Their inventory is up to date and they have expanded their system to be able to enjoy a higher level of service for existing users and accommodate the nearly 20 families who have joined since construction was completed.

But things got sticky when my colleague asked why some people in the community still were not connected to the system. As is quite typical, the reasons for non-connection varied, from users who had an alternative source and were thus choosing to not connect, to not being able to afford the extremely high connection fee of \$1,000. In a region where over 90 per cent of the population lives below

Kate Fogelberg (kfogelberg@waterforpeople.org) is with Water for People, Peru.

© Practical Action Publishing, 2012, www.practicalactionpublishing.org
doi: 10.3362/1756-3488.2012.024, ISSN: 0262-8104 (print) 1756-3488 (online)

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the poverty line, exercising their right to water will remain elusive if the water committee maintains this policy.

The social promoter argues that the high fee for new connections is only fair considering that free labour originally contributed when the system was built: 'But what about our contribution? Our sacrifice? We worked for sixty days to build this system, and the value of our work is what we are asking new users to pay for.' The President of the Water Committee recognizes that the cost of connection is very high, however, and he threw out the calculations for monetizing the unskilled labour of the original users. While community labour certainly contributes to the overall cost of any infrastructure project, I can't help but think the valuation of that work has complicated ensuring future access for others. They have

made some modifications to their policy over time, allowing people to make two \$500 payments instead of one \$1,000 payment, and if you were born to an original user of the water system, you are in luck, as your connection fee is a paltry couple of Bolivianos.

However, Grover Garcia, the young, forward-thinking mayor of Tiraque, wants to see *everyone* in his municipality with access to water, so he is dedicating some of his scarce budget to be used as incentives for water committees that find creative ways to ensure all people who want to be connected to improved systems are. Grover understands that providing safe water to every *Tiraqueno* – putting that right into practice – requires not just his leadership, but new ways of leveraging his public finance to end water poverty in his municipality.

Putting the right into practice requires not just leadership, but leveraging public finance
