Managing watersheds and the right to water: Indigenous communities in search of accountability and inclusion in Southern Veracruz

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The nature of the problem

Ecological degradation and economic injustice are often the result of the extraction or transfer of natural resources from poorer to richer, more influential regions. Dams, highway constructions and other major public works projects frequently generate conflict over natural resources that can be linked to a lack of accountability and adequate compensation mechanisms to address the impacts of natural resource extraction and exploitation. The story told in this chapter is one of imbalances of power between local communities and local, regional and national institutions; and of the conflicts and accountability problems related to these imbalances. The tensions that arise between these actors centre on the right to water; who exercises it and how; and the barriers to realising that right. A key issue that emerges in this case is the difficulty in realising the right to water and establishing accountability over how watersheds are managed, given the complex sets of actors and overlapping institutions and histories involved.[2]

Research for this chapter was carried out in the watershed of the Huazuntlán river (a tributary of the Coatzacoalcos) in southern Veracruz on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, an area that provides 75 per cent of the water for industrial and human use in two petro-industrial urban areas with over half a million inhabitants, Coatzacoalcos and Minatitlán. To supply water needed to fuel the oil industry along the coast of southeastern Mexico, water from the watershed is captured at the Yuribia dam (above the town of Tatahuicapan) in the rural mountainous rain forest region and transported for 60 kilometres by aqueduct to the cities below.[3] The compensation that these cities pay (or do not pay) to the indigenous

communities living in the watershed is at the heart of a long history of conflict that has developed between these communities and the urban public water authorities.

This extraction accounts for water scarcity, both for urban dwellers and for rural people, because it has not been accompanied by the sustainable management of the watershed territory. After heavy rains, urban households often lack water for three days because of the excess of sediment that clogs the dam and water treatment facilities. This problem is related, on one hand, to a model of development that promoted forms of land use unsuitable to tropical soils, such as the extension of large-scale cattle ranching (Tudela 1989; Ewell and Poleman, 1980; Lazos and Paré 2000)**.** On the other hand, it is related to inadequate planning and fragmented (sectorialised) public policies, and a centralised system of decision making. Decentralisation reforms in Mexico are intended to create spaces for public participation and accountability mechanisms, but these are often only consultative and not representative, and lack a permanent institutional life (Ribot 2002; Blauert 2004).[4]

Against this background, this chapter will examine the different strategies used by indigenous communities to realise the right to water and, in seeking compensation for water transfer, to build accountability in the way that the watershed is used and managed. It considers the governance issues, changes in perceptions of water and rights, mechanisms for participation and accountability (or their absence), and the conditions that prevent or lead to successful mobilisation for accountability. What this chapter reveals is that building accountability and co-responsibility between numerous actors with diverse and contradictory interests requires an ongoing process of negotiation and engagement through both formal and informal channels. For the rural indigenous groups living in the watershed, establishing accountability and protecting their right to water involves new challenges in establishing horizontal relationships of co-responsibility. These have to emerge within the communities themselves around the responsibility for maintaining the watershed, as well as between the indigenous communities, the urban municipalities and the reserve management. Our argument about accountability, therefore, is that the governance of (scarce) water requires a variety of mechanisms that can help to reconcile competing notions of accountability and correlate the associated rights and duties (see Mehta, Chapter 3). This chapter will show how traditional indigenous values can provide the basis for constructing a new, more solidly grounded culture of accountability.

The chapter includes a methodological and conceptual framework; a mapping of the social actors involved in water governance, and of their interests and perceptions; a description of the institutional and legal framework for water management and the gaps in mechanisms of accountability; and a discussion of the claims made by community organisations, and the resulting contestations, in the struggle to establish accountability. The chapter ends with some reflections on our role as researchers working to promote participatory and accountable natural resource management practices, and some conclusions about when particular strategies for demanding accountability around the right to water are successful. As an example of this, we present the strategy we designed in partnership with community groups for compensation of the environmental services they are providing.

Multiple strategies for natural resources management: a conceptual framework

In Mexico, the neoliberal development model's privileging of market forces has accelerated environmental destruction and the erosion of traditional local institutions. Major development projects have often deepened regional inequalities and the urban–rural gap as well as increasing social and political exclusion and poverty. The absence of an framework to address these inequalities is due to a lack of developed accountability mechanisms and rules, the poor enforcement of those that do exist, and the persistence of a political culture based on client–patron relationships (Paré 1975).

When communities lose control over their land, environmental degradation and poverty increases. In this case study, the transformation of land use, from slash-and-burn indigenous maize production into cattle ranching, has brought about not only the disruption of the rainforest landscape but also major social, cultural and political transformations.[5] Some authors define 'resilience' as the capacity of ecosystems to absorb disturbances or recuperate from natural events such as floods (Berkes 2004). But the capacity of ecosystems to regenerate is also influenced by the relationship between environmental and social change, and by social actors and institutions. In this case study, the relationship between environmental degradation and community institutions has an important influence on accountability issues.

Traditional notions of accountability are mostly limited to the obligation of governments to explain and justify their actions to citizens (Day and Klein 1987; Schacter 2000) and to electoral issues of ensuring