

AHJASA — ongoing management and maintenance support for Honduras' community water systems

by Andrew Trevett and Omar Nuñez

Community-led management of water supply systems is central to most countries' water policy — and water committees are the essential tools. But what sort of back-up is practical and affordable in isolated areas?

Honeymoon over

This policy of water committee formation has facilitated a large number of water systems in Honduras. So why are a worrying proportion either not working at their full capacity or, in some cases, not at all?



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In the last 10 years, Hondurans' access to potable water has risen by over 13 per cent.

DURING THE LATE 1980s, an increasing number of Honduras' community water supply systems were built by a wide spectrum of organizations which, as well as the Government Water and Sanitation Department, included international NGOs such as CARE, Save the Children, and the Catholic Relief Service; and national NGOs like Agua para el Pueblo, (Water for the People). As a result people's access to potable water in rural areas has jumped significantly, rising from 47 per cent in 1987, to 60 per cent in 1996.

All these agencies shared a common policy of establishing community water committees before any construction

went ahead — although each organization placed a slightly different emphasis on the implementation details. The main functions of the water committees set up in rural and peri-urban communities alike were to facilitate co-ordination between the implementing agency and the community during the construction phase of the project. Water committees organize construction teams, let the communities know about education workshops, and were responsible for storing construction materials safely; after construction, water committee members were responsible for the maintenance and management of the new water system; this included collecting money for upkeep.

It is now widely accepted that, along with employing appropriate technologies, good engineering on community water supply projects can not ensure continued functioning. An essential ingredient for the longevity of community water systems is adequate and regular maintenance and, in order to provide this, it is necessary both to establish who is responsible for that maintenance, and to equip them with the knowledge and resources to carry it out. It is fair to assume that the engineering was of a high standard; the logical conclusion must be, therefore, that the water committees failed to maintain the water systems.

All the implementing agencies ran



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education programmes during construction. Villagers and water committee members were encouraged — sometimes compelled — to attend a series of education workshops. A typical programme might include: an explanation of the various stages of construction, materials and components; followed by talks on hygiene and latrine use; the importance of chlorinating water; system maintenance; the importance of monthly tariffs; and the central role of the water committee.

Significantly, however, once operation was underway, the education programmes stopped.

The project engineers, technicians and educators would then move on to the next community, making a formal, ongoing relationship impractical.

AHJASA

The Honduran Association of Water System Committees (AHJASA) was

formed specifically to fill this vacuum. In 1990, Steven Fite, of the American National Rural Water Association (NRWA), visited several of the country's community water systems. He proposed a pilot project to establish the kind of problems facing communities trying to maintain their water systems, and, specifically, to measure the interest in forming a water association. Agua para el Pueblo carried out the study, visiting communities in the Department of Valle and talking to the villagers. Although the study period had been set at 10 months, within the first month, communities had shown such a high level of interest that a water association was set up immediately. The main problems identified by community members were that they lacked not only the technical skills needed to maintain their water systems, but also the ability to maintain a local organization for that purpose.

On 30 November 1990, AHJASA

was formed, with 17 members representing 17 communities from the Department of Valle.

One of Agua para el Pueblo's staff, appointed Association Co-ordinator, went to the United States for training in the operational principles of the NRWA. One of the most important aspects was the concept of 'Circuit Riders'. In essence, the Circuit Rider programme aims to provide technical assistance to rural water systems as and when required. AHJASA modified the basic NRWA programme to suit the conditions and needs of the Honduras communities.

AHJASA exists to:

- provide educational workshops to community water committees;
- provide technical and administrative advice; and
- facilitate mutual assistance between members.

Education and outreach

The education component is fundamental to providing water committees with the technical and managerial capacity to organize the day-to-day maintenance of their water systems. There are modules on different topics, geared towards members' target groups. For example, system operators can learn about basic system repairs, (changing valves or replacing damaged pipes), water quality, and pump maintenance; while administrators and treasurers can study basic book-keeping. More general talks are aimed at encouraging leadership, or showing members how to motivate villagers to pay monthly tariffs.

Technical and administrative advice is provided through the Circuit Rider programme. Circuit riders enable communities to solve the more complicated



An AHJASA training session.

technical problems; they also help water committee administrators with book-keeping difficulties. Circuit riders also fulfil a mediation role, helping to resolve internal disputes, and they explain legal statutes or regulations.

AHJASA's third aim of promoting mutual assistance between members has already proved useful, with one water committee sharing solutions to specific problems with neighbouring communities. During education workshops, members are given the opportunity to 'compare notes'. Through this process, committee members have grown in confidence, enabling them to manage their systems more effectively.

AHJASA offers new members a set of education modules to get the new member committee up and running. From then on, a circuit rider will make regular visits to ensure that both the water system and its committee are functioning properly. AHJASA also carries out water committee organization programmes in communities with newly constructed water systems. For existing members, educational material or technical advice is limited to requests for assistance, or when new or important topics are aired. For example, new repair techniques or providing advice if cholera incidence increases.

Membership of AHJASA brings additional benefits: for example, it buys stationery or replacement parts for pumps or distribution systems in

bulk and sells them on to members at cost. Members can also have their water analysed as AHJASA has access to a DelAgua water kit. A more indirect benefit has been the introduction of new types of handpump, and even the development and manufacture of a particular handpump.


Funding

AHJASA clearly offers considerable benefits to its members; but how is it financed? At present, approximately 80 per cent of the funding comes from the International Rural Water Association (IRWA), a further 15 per cent is provided by Agua para el Pueblo, and the final 5 per cent is made up with membership fees — collected as a proportion of monthly water tariffs. Typically, members pay Lps.0.50 (£0.03) or less per connection or system user. Villagers pay monthly tariffs ranging from Lps.2 (£0.10) for a well with handpump, to Lps.30 (£1.50) for a pumped system with household connections. The average tariff range is probably between Lps. 5 and 12 (£0.25 to 60). The tariff rate not only reflects the system type but, to some extent, the economic ability to pay.

To date, there has been no independent evaluation of AHJASA to examine its successes or failings. One measure of its achievements, however, is that the Association has grown from 17 members in one Department of Honduras to a current total of 200, across five departments. There are now five, full-time circuit riders, one of whom doubles as the Association Co-ordinator. In August 1997, the Association held its first National Convention, also attended by delegates from Nicaragua and El Salvador. One of the outcomes was the election of a National Board.

Although AHJASA is unique in Honduras, and possibly in Latin America, it is important to emphasize that it is not the only organization working to provide ongoing support to community water systems. SANAA, together with USAID, has organized a support mechanism based on the Operation and Maintenance Technician (TOM) system. Each technician covers approximately 50 rural water systems, and provides support to water committees. A useful evaluation tool has been developed to help the technician appraise the condition of the water system quickly.

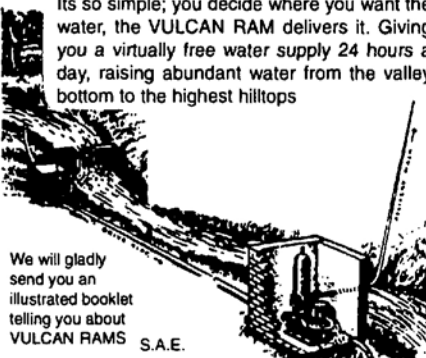
There are four classifications: an 'A'



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system is functioning well and needs no attention; a 'B' system is working but has 'software' problems, for example, the system management needs better organizing; a 'C' system has some technical or 'hardware' failing but can be rectified by the water committee; and a 'D' system requires significant investment beyond the resources of the community.

Perhaps the main difference between AHJASA and other available support mechanisms to community water systems and their users, is that members are encouraged to think of AHJASA as their organization, working for their benefit. This belief in ownership and accepting responsibility is an important concept, and is, after all, central to another policy of conveying to people the idea that it is their water system.

Andrew Trevett is currently working as Public Health Engineer for Co-operacion Internacional para el Desarrollo (CID) in El Salvador. He is undertaking PhD studies at Silsoe College, Cranfield University and is concerned with the development of strategies for improving public health through domestic water-quality management. He can be contacted at CID, Colonia Miramonte Poniente, Avenida B, Pasaje, El Rosal #16, CP-0907-29, San Salvador, El Salvador. Fax: +503 260 4414. E-mail: cidesal@es.com.sv Omar Nuñez is the Co-ordinator of AHJASA and was the original Circuit Rider in Honduras.



A woman uses a 'rope and washer' pump that has been modified and improved by AHJASA.