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# The work of the ants

Labour and community reinventing public water  
in Colombia

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## Series Editors: David A. McDonald and Greg Ruiters

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### ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Municipal Services Project (MSP) is a research project that explores alternatives to the privatization and commercialization of service provision in electricity, health, water and sanitation in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is composed of academics, labour unions, non-governmental organizations, social movements and activists from around the globe who are committed to analyzing successful alternative service delivery models to understand the conditions required for their sustainability and reproducibility.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite Colombia's natural abundance of water, nearly a third of Colombians are denied basic access to water services. To close this gap, water services in rural and peri-urban areas have traditionally been delivered by a rich variety of autonomous community-owned systems. Some of these *acueductos comunitarios* are threatened by neoliberal policies of privatization and 'regionalization' of services that impose a commercialized model of water management favouring economies of scale over local autonomy.

This paper documents the struggles of one such community to find an alternative to both private and 'state' modes of service delivery. We focus on the peri-urban and rural areas of the department of Valle del Cauca, where unionized water workers and local citizens have been fighting privatization for almost two decades. They have mobilized around the national referendum campaign on the right to water, public-public partnerships and, more recently, the defence of community aqueducts that provide essential services to marginalized populations.

This action-research project looked at the experience of building coalitions between public employees from the trade unions SINTRACUAVALLE and SINTRAMBIENTE, which represent workers from the public water provider ACUAVALLE (operating in the Valle del Cauca outside of the city of Cali) and the environmental agency CVC, and members of the community aqueduct in La Sirena, beginning in 2008. Among water activists in Colombia, La Sirena has been touted as a promising alternative to both marketized models of management as well as top-down state-centric models, demonstrating that democratic, non-profit, publicly owned and locally controlled water systems are viable.

Labour-community alliances are hard work, but they are possible. It took years to build the trust necessary to come to a formal agreement, eventually signed in 2012, between workers and the community aqueduct to expand service coverage and build capacity. La Sirena's aqueduct staff and its Board found that learning about laws and norms was an especially valuable payoff from the partnership because they had no formal training in managing water systems. Thanks to training with union staff, they improved their metering techniques, tariff structure and billing methods, which put them on the path to greater social and financial sustainability. Since the creation of the alliance, the service network has expanded, leaks have been fixed, and there has been no water rationing (formerly a common problem in summer months).

On the environmental front, staff from the community association have learned to monitor the watersheds regularly and to report violations; they are now collaborating with neighbouring aqueducts in recognition of their shared responsibility to protect the watersheds they all rely on. Aqueduct leaders have also proposed a project to create a plant nursery to restore the area after years of deforestation.

This early initiative in defence of 'public' water has served to strengthen both local management of this essential service and to build solidarity between unions and communities, encouraging the development of many more such alliances in the region. But the challenges are numerous. It is daunting to try to coordinate between unions that have different mandates (in this case, environmental protection and water delivery) and limited capacity to fund community work. Even more difficult is cooperation between unions and communities that have distinct organizational forms, capacities and histories; it requires time and sustained effort on both sides to build trust and understanding.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is that genuine exchange and reciprocity between unions and communities needs to overcome the reality that these organizations are in an inherently asymmetrical relationship, since unions have stronger capacity with respect to human and financial resources. Recognizing, let alone dealing with, these inherent differences and imbalances makes labour-community alliances a test of political wills from the start. Nevertheless, such exchanges have the potential to advance questions about 'alternatives' that go beyond the nuts and bolts of service provision by highlighting the unique contributions of community aqueducts: their vision of the commons, responsible consumption, economic solidarity and self-government, among others.

Considering how difficult it was to bring together a relatively small and dedicated set of actors to pursue clearly defined short-term goals in La Sirena, it will not be easy to reproduce such a model elsewhere. But our research shows that concrete results in one location can lend the credibility necessary to kickstart new alliances elsewhere.

We think that there are three main lessons that can be drawn from this case study and applied in the development of labour-community alliances elsewhere in the world:

1. An alliance is only a **first step in creating solidarity** over the longer term. It is an empowerment tool as well as a learning process of movement building.
2. Local initiatives that are **part of a larger political struggle for alternatives** to privatization nationally can reframe notions of 'publicness,' inspire direct action and help develop collective identities.
3. **Transnational support is key** in local labour struggles in defence of public services. In turn, successful local alternatives give activists the ammunition to continue to advance public alternatives to neoliberal restructuring globally.

## Introduction

It is a beautiful Sunday morning, and the town is still sleeping. Six public water utility workers share a *tinto* (coffee) before loading into a jeep that takes us deep into the hillsides of La Melba, Valle del Cauca, for a popular assembly on a proposed collaboration between the community aqueduct and local unions. After the bumpy 30-minute ride in the heat, one of the workers breaks into a wide smile and says: “What is one’s purpose in life if not to serve others?”<sup>1</sup> In a country still struggling to overcome its violent past and scarred by extreme inequalities, his statement summarizes a general sentiment among members of local public service unions that they are doing the “work of the ants,” that is, labouring collectively to build a better country, one community at a time.

Colombia has the second largest annual average of renewable freshwater resources in Latin America, and the seventh in the world (FAO 2000). Despite its natural abundance, 30 per cent of Colombians do not have basic access to an improved water source (Garcés 2009). Water scarcity disproportionately affects rural areas, where a quarter of the population lives.<sup>2</sup> The privatizations of the 1990s were intended to improve water services and redress such inequalities, yet the communities most in need were harmed by restructuring, which caused prices to rise, rendering water and sanitation services even less accessible.

Activists have used a variety of tactics to fight the government’s neoliberal agenda, three of which are analyzed in this paper: a national referendum campaign to make water a constitutional human right; public-public partnerships to strengthen service utilities (e.g. PuPs between national, departmental or municipal institutions); and public-community partnerships such as labour-community alliances to sustain local battles.<sup>3</sup> In rural areas, they launched initiatives to protect watersheds and promote traditional systems of water management such as community aqueducts.

This paper documents the struggle to promote alternatives to private modes of water service delivery in Colombia. We focus on the peri-urban and rural areas in the department of Valle del Cauca, where workers and community members have been resisting privatization of water and sanitation services for almost two decades. Despite repeated attempts to privatize ACUAVALLE, the public water and sanitation provider outside the department’s capital city of Cali, worker-community coalitions have successfully maintained public control over the majority of the utility’s operations by brokering an eleventh hour public-public partnership with the regional environmental authority – the Autonomous Corporation of the Cauca Valley Region (CVC in Spanish). Local activists have also worked to preserve and strengthen the capacity of community-owned and -operated aqueducts, notably through a labour-community alliance in La Sirena (a poor suburb of Cali) that has inspired other solidarity initiatives with rural groups in the region.

In a study of Latin American ‘best practices’ in water services, La Sirena was identified as a promising alternative to marketized models of management in peri-urban and rural areas, demonstrating that democratic, non-profit, publicly owned and controlled water systems are viable (Spronk et al 2012).



Before the assembly to debate an agreement between the unions and the *acueducto comunitario* in La Melba, Valle del Cauca. Photo: Madeleine Bélanger D., October 20, 2013.

Our action-research project looked specifically at the experience of building an alliance<sup>4</sup> between unionized public employees from the trade unions SINTRACUAVALLE and SINTRAMBIENTE, which represent workers from water provider ACUAVALLE and the environmental agency CVC, and members of the community aqueduct in La Sirena, Valle del Cauca.

As a member of the inter-American water network Red VIDA<sup>5</sup> and the Platform for Public-Community Partnerships in the Americas (Plataforma-APC), SINTRACUAVALLE has been committed to sharing this experience across borders. Fieldwork was conducted over five weeks in October and November of 2013. It combined a series of joint research planning meetings, individual interviews, field visits and focus groups with workers and community members to collectively document the process of engagement and to identify lessons learned. The planning meetings brought together key union members and community leaders involved in the alliance to establish the composition of focus groups, to determine the main themes to be addressed, to arrange other observation activities and to plan a final workshop. Two separate three-hour focus groups were organized with the unions<sup>6</sup> and community members,<sup>7</sup> for which they received questionnaires in advance and were invited to comment. A final workshop to discuss ways forward brought together workers and community leaders from La Sirena as well as from two other *acueductos comunitarios* that were in the process of sealing similar partnerships with the unions.<sup>8</sup>

## Privatization and the need for labour-community alliances

The threat of privatization has created significant challenges for the producers and users of public services. In cases where services have been privatized, citizens face higher user fees and restricted access; workers are asked to do more with less to improve profit margins, resulting in massive

layoffs. Public servants everywhere are under considerable pressure to accept concessions, including lower salaries, benefits and pensions to lower the costs of service delivery. The neoliberal model – whether the utility is privately or publicly owned – depends on the casualization of work, as contract workers replace full-time employees who once enjoyed decent working conditions and job security through the process of *'tercialización'*, or third-party contracting (personal interview with Jorge Iván Vélez; see also McDonald 2014).

As users *and* producers of public services, public sector workers have thus been doubly hit by the privatization agenda (Barchiesi 2007). It is not surprising then that trade unions have been at the forefront of struggles to defend, expand and improve public services. Labour-community alliances have been particularly common in struggles to defend the provision of public goods, such as health care, electricity and water and sanitation. Such coalitions have successfully reversed privatizations of public services in countries as diverse as Canada, Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador and the Philippines (Almeida 2006; Spronk and Terhorst 2012).

As labour historian Stephanie Ross (2013) explains, such labour-community alliances emerge more frequently in the public sector than in the private sector for several reasons. First, the traditional economic concerns of public sector unions are inevitably bound up in the provision of public goods. Indeed, as Ross argues, it is relatively easy for public sector workers to frame their issues as broader community issues (compared, for example, to workers who manufacture garments and textiles for export). Second, the provision of services very often brings workers and community members into close contact, facilitating the development of a shared interest in quality public services. Third, neoliberal restructuring has politicized public sector unions and fragmented working class organizations, making the need for coalitions among a wide variety of organizations more urgent. Finally, the high percentage of unionized women in the public sector and the multiple spaces of women's labour have facilitated the development of activism across spaces of production and reproduction, contributing to practices known as "social unionism" (Ross 2013) or "social movement unionism" (Camfield 2013), particularly in female-dominated sectors such as health and education.

In Colombia, public sector unions have been at the forefront of struggles to defend the 'publicness' of water as a resource and service despite the fact that it is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a trade unionist. Unionists – particularly from the public sector (Amnesty International 2007) – have been the target of violent attacks and since 1986 almost 3,000 have been killed, largely with impunity (HRW 2013). Recent figures demonstrate that unionization rates have been on the decline, from 4.8 per cent of the workforce in 2005 to 4.4 per cent in 2011, largely due to changes in labour legislation and corporate restructuring (US State Dept 2011). The public sector, however, still has fairly robust union density. In 2010, 28.7 per cent of workers in the public sector were represented by a trade union (ILO 2013). But these workers are generally covered by weak, 'concentrated agreements' rather than contracts negotiated through collective bargaining. The use of various forms of contract labour is widespread, and the right to strike is highly restricted (US State Dept 2011).



Colombia has been no exception to the privatization trend that has swept Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1991, the Colombian constitutional reform abolished public monopoly over service utilities. In the case of water provision, this change prohibited delivering water at prices lower than operational costs – a policy shift supposedly led by the “drive to depoliticize water governance” (Urueña 2012, 285; see also Barrera-Osorio and Olivera 2007, 8). The Public Services Law 142 of 1994 reinforced this institutional framework by requiring the incorporation of public service providers as joint-stock companies, clearing the way for the corporatization of some public service utilities (see Chavez n.d., for example) and the privatization of others. In the water and sanitation sector, French and Spanish multinationals such as Veolia, Aguas de Barcelona, Canal de Isabel and the FCC Group entered the new water market (see López n.d., 5), leading to significant job cuts in privatized utilities and higher prices for water users. According to Oscar Gutiérrez from the National Union of Users and Defenders of Public Services, the entry of private operators was helped by the fact that “politicking and corruption within those enterprises contributed to popular support for privatization” (personal interview).

Within a neoliberal context marked by corruption and state-sponsored violence, the labour movement has been stigmatized and its image tarnished, meaning that workers not only have to resist privatization but also have to rekindle trust from citizens to regain their mobilization capacity. By 2001, however, evidence was increasingly weighing in favour of public water as it became clear that water privatization had led to growing inequalities, with low-income users paying 30 per cent more for their water services (Defensoría del Pueblo 2010, 34). The increase in coverage was accompanied by a trend of “higher prices and lower [rates of] consumption” (Barrera-Osorio and Olivera 2007, 10). As discontent grew across the country, so did popular mobilization and international pressure, which led the government to change course (communication with Juan Camilo Mira).

In Valle del Cauca, worker resistance to privatization of essential services was particularly fierce. From the epic struggle that began in 1995 to keep the capital’s multi-service utility EMCALI in public hands (see Novelli 2004) to the eleventh-hour rescue of ACUAVALLE from a 20-year concession plan (SINTRACUAVALLE 2013), public utility workers were able to garner broad-based support from the communities they serve to fend off aggressive attempts to privatize services.

At the time, similar private takeovers were occurring across Latin America, and a large grassroots movement formed to oppose water privatization in the region, grouped around the Red VIDA. The main actors were community members from the water committees, neighbourhood aqueduct groups, cooperatives, and water workers’ unions, all of which were concerned about the negative implications of privatization for equity and access to services. Colombian water activists developed strong transnational ties with a wide array of organizations that had launched successful campaigns to defend public water in Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Uruguay, which offered promising pathways for change at home.

# Struggles for alternatives to privatization in Colombia

Popular struggle in defense of public water has taken many forms in Colombia. Key strategies built on a repertoire shared with other popular resistance struggles in Latin America (Perera 2013), including the organization of a referendum campaign on the right to water, the formation of public-public partnerships (PuPs) to prevent privatization of water utilities, and advocacy in defense of traditional water systems mostly located in rural areas.

## Referendum campaign on the constitutional right to water

Inspired by the successful Uruguayan constitutional challenge to water privatization in 2004, campaigners in Colombia mobilized to incorporate the right to water into the Constitution, albeit with mixed results (see Dugard and Drage 2012). In May 2005, Colombian water activists united under the banner of ECOFONDO to promote water as a public good (Márquez Valderrama 2012). Their campaign gained momentum, and two years on they decided to form the *Comité Nacional en Defensa del Agua y de la Vida* (CNDAV) to call for a referendum on a constitutional amendment that would “legally enshrine the fundamental right to potable water, a minimum amount of free water (*mínimo vital*), public management of the resource, and the special protection of ecosystems essential to the water cycle” (Dugard and Drage 2012, 11). Importantly, it sought recognition and support for the thousands of community organizations who had been involved in water provision for decades.

Labour played an important role in the referendum coalition that united over 1,200 member groups (FWW 2009). Among them, SINTRACUAVALLE workers and their *compañeros* from SINTRAMBIENTE participated actively by raising awareness and collecting signatures. Larger unions such as the telecommunications and bank workers’ unions (ETB and ANEBRE) provided broader financial support, and the national union of public employees (SINTRAEMDES) organized regional forums (personal interview with Marta Cañon and Rodrigo Acosta). On September 29, 2009, the coalition submitted 2,500,000 signatures in support of the referendum, but then-President Álvaro Uribe pushed for significant changes to the text, slashing key demands (FWW 2009). CNDAV expressed concern with the changes before Congress, which voted to adopt the watered-down text nonetheless, effectively burying the campaign in June 2010. According to Juan Camilo Mira, then coordinator of Ecofondo: “It was like a knockout punch in a boxing match. It was really hard for the movement – in our souls we never thought they’d be able to stop the referendum” (cited in Dugard and Drage 2012, 12). Soon financing dried up and political differences among actors re-emerged in sectoral and power struggles, causing the movement to implode (communication with Juan Camilo Mira).

Nonetheless, Rodrigo Acosta, long-time water campaigner and advisor for various unions, notes that although the campaign ultimately failed to achieve its main goal, “the socio-political consensus achieved through the referendum process remains: water as a public good; the right to a minimum

amount of free water; the struggle against privatization; and the defence of community aqueducts” (personal interview). The process itself contributed to building the capacity of the *acueductos*, which initiated their own “counter-network to resist dispossession and absorption by large private or public water companies” (see Perera 2014, 4), as will be explained further on. In fact, the campaign may have influenced public opinion, which in turn resulted in important policy changes. Cities such as Bogotá and Medellín implemented the vital minimum (*mínimo vital*) (Márquez Valderrama 2012, also see his critique of the approach) and the courts have outlawed cut-offs for households with ‘vulnerable members’ (minors, elderly, displaced, single mothers) (Urueña 2012; Vargas Motta 2010).

## Public-public partnerships

The idea to form PuPs in Colombia was partly inspired by two public water companies, Aguas Bonaerenses SA (ABSA, Argentina) and Obras Sanitarias del Estado (OSE, Uruguay), which are pioneers in this regard (Spronk et al 2012, 2014). These publicly owned and operated utilities have provided financial and technical assistance to other utilities to help keep water in public hands. Such cooperation has been essential in building a water management model that maintains the service providers’ public status and allows for dynamic community outreach while achieving quality coverage.

One successful PuP in Colombia was brokered in Valle del Cauca, where water activists successfully advocated for a partnership between public water utility ACUAVALLE and the regional environmental authority CVC. In 2005, ACUAVALLE transferred 39 per cent of its shares from the department and municipalities to the CVC to stave off privatization. This move brought drinking water solutions to seven municipalities in Valle del Cauca where there were significant inequalities in terms of access (SINTRACUAVALLE 2013, 9).

### FIGURE 1:

ACUAVALLE service map for 33 municipalities in the department of Valle del Cauca, April 2014

**ACUAVALLE delivers water to a dispersed population of 156,734 people spread across 78% of the territory of Valle del Cauca, which represents 14% of users in the department. Because 94% of their users are from lower income quintiles, recovering costs as required by Colombia’s neoliberal legal framework is a challenge.**



Source: Mapa de usuarios de ACUAVALLE, <http://www.acuavalle.gov.co/agua.aspx> (accessed September 11, 2014).

Workers from the CVC had unionized nationally in 2000 in SINTRAMBIENTE (Union of Workers from the National Environmental System), and the Valle del Cauca chapter soon forged ties with its sister union SINTRACUAVALLE (Union of Workers from ACUAVALLE). With support from their respective public entities, the unions developed concrete initiatives to reinforce autonomous management of water in communities, including in La Sirena.

## Community aqueducts

Within the national and Latin American water justice movements, community aqueducts have emerged as one of the most practical and culturally appropriate public alternatives to address rural water problems. In Colombia, water services were decentralized in the 1980s and responsibility for maintaining and developing the infrastructure was transferred to municipalities (Barrera-Osorio and Olivera 2007). Most *acueductos comunitarios* came to life with the initial public investment in rural water infrastructure that followed, and from then on communities took on their maintenance with scant or no support from the state. In some cases it was the communities themselves that saved the little money they had to build their own systems in those years – such as in La Sirena, as will be discussed below. According to one analyst, “local water management, which has been more focused on immediate needs and fragmented compared to the regional or national levels, has built forms of self-management and parallel community schemes” (Correa 2006, 12). There are now approximately 11,500 community organizations delivering water services in rural and peri-urban areas in Colombia (Smits, Rojas and Tamayo 2011); they are responsible for 40 per cent of water services in rural areas and in some cities they provide nearly 20 per cent of water services (Colmenares and Mira 2007).

There is rich diversity among the *acueductos comunitarios* but “above all they are popular institutions responsible for water management that form part of the social fabric in hillside communities, indigenous reserves, [and] black communities” (Correa 2006, 14). Traditionally, they are “neither statal nor private” (personal interview with Rodrigo Acosta); their “vision of what is ‘public’ goes well beyond the state, they have their own norms and mandates to manage public goods” (personal interview with Diego Martinez). This autonomy is not surprising given the virtual absence of the state in these areas. Thus community aqueducts play an essential public role insofar as they are “popular, peasant institutions that manage a common resource based on a social economic vision and solidarity” (communication with Javier Márquez).

This alternative model has come under threat with the neoliberal water policies put in place since the 1990s. The legal and institutional water regime “forces small providers from rural areas into illegality” (Uribe Botero 2005, 5), due to the focus on financial viability stipulated by the new “regulatory structure designed for companies” (Brown et al 2013). Some have been absorbed by larger operators, while others had to adopt a business approach and legalize their status to be allowed to stay in operation. This threat became more acute with the implementation of Departmental Development Plans (PDAs in Spanish) predicated on World Bank prescriptions beginning in 2007. The PDAs aimed to centralize operations at the department level to create economies of scale for new regional water providers. One stated goal was to attract investments to improve public services, but according

to critics it siphoned a considerable amount of money into administration with no significant implementation (Vargas Nuñez 2012) and became a vehicle for private profit, allowing the entry of private-sector 'specialized' operators with no sizeable investment (Salazar Restrepo 2011; Urrea and Cárdenas 2011). This roadmap imposed by Bogota also introduced the mantra of cost recovery for public utilities (Urrea and Cárdenas 2011, 17), forcing the sale of numerous municipal aqueducts and precipitating the demise of smaller community operators. The policy was abolished in 2011 (Urrea 2011), a year and a half into President Juan Manuel Santos' mandate, but what still remains is the "vision of regional markets that commodify and commercialize water services, even if the enterprises may be public" (communication with Javier Márquez).

Today, community aqueducts face a number of challenges. Within the current regulatory framework, their main problem is water quality, which cannot be fully tackled without public investment in rural water and sanitation systems. The neoliberal orientation of water legislation in the country also imposes financial sustainability criteria that few small community providers can meet in conditions of extreme poverty. Cecilia Roa García, who is part of a research project that has been documenting the work of eight community-owned water systems in Valle del Cauca and Risalda, stresses that "they are fulfilling a role that the state cannot fulfill," yet they receive very little support. As she argues, "they need to advocate for municipal support for infrastructure, and the only way they can receive subsidies is also via municipalities" (personal interview; see also Roa García and Pulido Rozo 2014). Focusing on climate change adaptability, her research team has raised some additional challenges: "variability in water supply, extensive distribution networks in low population density areas, limited storage capacity, and lack of control over the watersheds, among others" (Brown et al 2013).

The mounting pressure on the *acueductos comunitarios* over the past two decades encouraged the creation of regional associations to help them learn to adjust to the new legal and regulatory framework. For example, in Valle del Cauca, the Association of Community Organizations Providing Public Services in Water and Sanitation (AQUACOL) was created in 2001 by 24 small water providers to build legal, administrative and technical capacity. AQUACOL also acts as an interlocutor between the community associations and local, departmental and national institutions. Later, they formed a national network of community aqueducts to advocate for their interests in national forums. According to Oscar Gutiérrez (personal interview) it was "the referendum that allowed [for] this convergence of community aqueducts" as important political actors.

Community aqueducts have also been at the heart of anti-privatization strategies in the country. For SINTRACUAVALLE President Margarita López, "they helped us to put up a fight, to take the streets to reject all privatizations so that it [the government] wouldn't touch rural aqueducts, so it would respect the autonomies of our territories and protect our water sources where they come to life" (focus group). This shared goal between workers and community aqueduct members created the conditions for the successful experiment among SINTRACUAVALLE, SINTRAMBIENTE and La Sirena as part of the regional Platform for Public-Community Partnerships in the Americas (Plataforma-APC).

## Community water management: The case of La Sirena

Among water activists in Colombia, the community aqueduct in La Sirena is considered an example of 'best practice' for at least three reasons (Spronk et al 2012). First, it brings quality water around the clock to all its residents at an affordable price. Second, it has been praised for its autonomy, transparency and public ethos: the community owns the infrastructure and network, which it has developed and maintained in a financially responsible manner. Third, it is the site where one of the first formal alliances between community members and public utility workers was formed to resist the government's agenda of water privatization and to promote alternative models of water delivery.

In 1971, 20 families invaded the property of a large landowner on the outskirts of Cali and started building the community they later called La Sirena (Herrera cited in ACCCR 2011). At the height of the Colombian civil conflict, this settlement occupied by guerilla group M-19 was tagged a red zone. Given this political history, it is perhaps not surprising that to this day community leaders remain fiercely independent from the state as illustrated further below (José Noé García, planning meeting).

Problems related to the lack of infrastructure became more acute as the population continued to expand. In 1979, the first Community Action Board was democratically elected to manage community issues such as water supply. In the mid-1980s, it built the first water catchment to bring water from the Epaminondas stream to La Sirena, which at the time had about 1,300 inhabitants (300 households). Two years later, they started pumping from Las Valencias stream and the Meléndez River eight kilometers upstream in the Farrallones forest reserve. To increase coverage and improve water quality, the community worked with researchers from a water institute at the Universidad del Valle, CINARA, to transition from a system with untreated water running through hoses to a piped one with a slow sand filtration system, which was built in the early 1990s. To address high turbidity during the winter months, CINARA also designed a brand new plant that combined the use of filters with control for bio matter (UN-Habitat 1996). By 1995, the community water system provided water to an impressive 95 per cent of households. To manage this upgraded aqueduct, a new board was created in 1998, separate from the Community Action Board. The positions of president, vice-president, public prosecutor, secretary and treasurer are elected by general assembly.

Over time, Cali has continued to sprawl. Once a relatively isolated rural community, La Sirena has now been absorbed by the city. Nonetheless, the public water utility serving the metropolitan area, EMCALI, has not been interested in expanding formal water and sanitation services to reach La Sirena residents in part because it would be very costly to deliver water to the hillside neighbourhood from the valley.

To this day, aqueduct managers value this autonomy and pride themselves on the fact that “they haven’t received a penny” from the state since 1994. Due to the desire to maintain community control over water, the community has forfeited department- and national-level investment. The current aqueduct president, José Noé García, recalls that after the aqueduct system registered with the *Superintendencia de Servicios Públicos* in 2006, the Ministry of Public Health, and later the departmental administration via the Program for Rural Water Supply (PAAR in Spanish), offered to invest in further upgrades to and expansion of the system, on the condition that control over operations be ceded to the municipality: “We fiercely opposed this [transfer]... it would have meant handing them the keys to our house!” (focus group). He explained:

“We put in a lot work, as did those who created it; we saved money, we fixed pipes, we starved, we got wet... And once we have a legal enterprise in place with 24-hour service, to see Public Health try and hand it to the municipality: ‘No!’ They pestered and pestered, but there was no way we would turn over the titles. They put so much pressure...”

Despite the fact that the community aqueduct has been financed exclusively by residents, the board has managed to continue to expand at about the same rate as population growth in this peri-urban zone. By 2013 the Subscribers Association of La Sirena was delivering water to 918 households (representing 5,500 users), up from 698 in 2004. Since 2004, board members have not received any salary or bonuses in order to ensure that as much money as possible is reinvested in the water network. Its president explains: “If among 5,000 people there aren’t five willing to volunteer for such a noble cause as the aqueduct, well, we are doomed... Working here provides the satisfaction of serving one’s community” (José Noé García, focus group).

Two paid plant operators maintain the system, and one secretary is on staff to manage the administrative side. The association releases annual financial and administrative statements, and users convene at an annual assembly. Statutes stipulate that any investment over COP 20,000,000 (roughly \$10,000) has to be approved by the general assembly to avoid mispending.

Overall, the aqueduct’s management and cost structure has served as a model of efficiency and transparency among its peers from the regional association AQUACOL. However, there is considerable debate regarding the aqueduct’s reliance on voluntary work as well as on the more complex issue of government subsidies. Indeed, La Sirena is entitled to subsidies, which it prefers not to access for fear of becoming dependent on government funds (yet 99 per cent of subscribers are from the lowest quintile, and would pay even lower water rates than they are currently if the tariff methodology of the regulatory authority, the *Comisión de Regulación de Agua Potable y Saneamiento Básico*, were to be used; see Roa García and Pulido Rozo 2014). For all its success, La Sirena also faces challenges in trying to comply with complex water legislation and aging infrastructure, which is what prompted the leaders of the aqueduct to pursue an alliance with local unions.



La Sirena aqueduct's team during a visit of the treatment plant, with two representatives from SINTRACUAVALLE.  
Photo: Madeleine Bélanger D., Octobre 15, 2013.

## History of the labour-community alliance

When ACUAVALLE was first faced with the threat of privatization in the early 2000s, 14-year union president Margarita López recalls that they needed two things: evidence in favour of public services and the support of the community (focus group). It was as important to have solid information to counter pro-privatization arguments as it was to garner community support: “we needed to be accompanied by a multitude of people: users, workers, citizens from the different social sectors” (focus group). The struggle has been ongoing ever since, and workers have continued their popular outreach activities as the public utility faced “a series of threats, from liquidation to concession contracts to deliver services, to the privatization of specific sectors of activity” (López 2013, 9).

For SINTRAMBIENTE, it was never a matter of defending its own public enterprise from privatization although then-president Tulio Murillo notes that the environmental mandate was undermined by the fact that decision-makers within the CVC “were more preoccupied by money than the environment” (group interview). Above all, SINTRAMBIENTE’s community outreach was meant to contribute to broader struggles “against megaprojects, mining, agro-fuels and the issue of infrastructure that poses the most significant threat to ecosystems” (Tulio Murillo, focus group). Rural communities in particular were recognized as necessary allies to work on those fronts. In particular, “it is key to have the support from the community” to establish conservation zones (personal interview with Carlos Alberto Posada). A more political goal of the union was also to raise awareness of the importance of public water for all as a way to keep the referendum demands alive (Tulio Murillo, focus group).

The support of international networks proved key for the partnership with La Sirena to get off the ground. Both SINTRACUAVALLE and SINTRAMBIENTE are affiliated with Public Services International (PSI), a federation of public sector trade unions that has been promoting the formation of PuPs and



labour-community alliances since the early 2000s. The idea to reach out to communities to fend off privatization first emerged in the context of these discussions and PSI provided financial support. SINTRACUAVALLE first contacted La Sirena to learn more about its experience with community water management in 2008. However, according to Olmedo Tapias, who was the first worker to go to La Sirena under the union's banner, it was joining the Plataforma-APC in 2009 that created the "possibility to deepen collaboration" (focus group).

Initially, as SINTRACUAVALLE vice-president Julio César Osorio explains, "the objective of the voluntary agreement with La Sirena was to be in close contact with those communities, to learn more about smaller aqueducts, to grow the ranks of the defenders of water and of what is public" (focus group). It is possible that it was ACUAVALLE's experience with resisting privatization efforts over so many years that gave its union such a strong will to defend all things public, and to ally with communities in a way that others have not.<sup>9</sup>

## Building trust

The first contact between the community and SINTRACUAVALLE was marked by deep mistrust. Not only had the community leaders gotten their fingers burned when dealing with public authorities who tried to take over their aqueduct, but ACUAVALLE's management had also been marred by corruption scandals (Cárdenas Lesmes 2011). As Olmedo Tapias explains:

"The first time I went to the site to look for José Noé [the president of the aqueduct] their reaction was that they wouldn't have me. After four or five more phone calls I was able to get them to receive me. But when I got to the site they answered me through burglars' bars.... I told him that I was a worker from ACUAVALLE. To my surprise his response was: 'I want nothing to do with ACUAVALLE.' Clearly he already had his mind made up about ACUAVALLE. Then I explained that I was coming to represent the workers' union SINTRACUAVALLE, that we are a social organization just as much as them, an organization of people with convictions, I explained that there was this international experience where we'd only like to showcase the aqueduct, that this wouldn't commit them to anything more." (focus group)

The President of the aqueduct José Noé García explains this initial reluctance to engage: "In the beginning, we are always very careful when someone comes to the aqueduct to request information because we never know if that person has other intentions" (focus group).

On the union side, a certain reticence to engage was also felt among workers. There was a "fear to work with the community due to stigmatization [of unionists]" (Margarita López, focus group). The SINTRACUAVALLE workers who decided to participate in the alliance did so to move beyond the

myopic focus on workplace issues and to revitalize their union after corruption scandals implicating top-level managers badly damaged their public image (Cárdenas Lesmes 2011). As Lina Cañas recalls, she was hoping “that they would understand that as a union we are changing” (focus group). Margarita López adds that it was indeed their very image that they wanted to change, to show that “we are not only thinking about our own labour gains [e.g. salaries and benefits] and are doing something to defend what is ‘public’” (joint planning meeting). Even for SINTRAMBIENTE workers, who could hardly be perceived as attempting to overtake the aqueduct, changing this negative perception of ‘the unionist’ proved a challenge (Maria Fernanda Castillo, group interview).

It took workers two years to build the necessary trust to make deeper collaboration possible. A long series of meetings preceded the first ‘pre-agreement’ signed in 2010, when joint work started in earnest to identify concrete avenues for cooperation. By May 2012 they had mobilized the necessary resources and formalized the main goals of the alliance. José Noé García stresses how hard it was to get the community on board given deep-rooted suspicion of outsiders in general and unions in particular: “Half of the community were thinking or saying that partnering with the union would mean signing for life; but no, the collaboration took place and we remain independent, we have them as a point of reference and support” (focus group).

There was a clear distrust of unions and the state in this community, but once the parties could agree to a formal alliance that would guarantee the aqueduct’s independence, the cooperation project finally got off the ground. Workers were selected to take part in the alliance based on their location and potential, both in terms of experience and social engagement. “Rather than being told to participate, we volunteered,” says Lina Cañas (focus group). A total of 12 workers from SINTRACUAVALLE and SINTRAMBIENTE and 7 representatives from La Sirena took part directly in the formal cooperation agreement on a volunteer basis.<sup>10</sup>

### Sharing knowledge

Once the labour-community alliance was signed, the more specific objectives were set. Most of the immediate concerns of the *acueducto comunitario* were of an operational nature and aimed to improve efficiency in service delivery. A team of workers met community leaders for a visit of the water network with a view to updating plans and making suggestions for improvements and future development. Wilson Álvarez, responsible for plans and network archives in ACUAVALLE for more than 28 years and an active member of the union, voluntarily spent weekends in La Sirena to meticulously detail the water network plans: “We had to take this information and update it with new diameters and lengths, to see what new works they had done to incorporate all of this in the plans so that they could function better” (focus group). Lina Cañas, who works in ACUAVALLE and has been the union’s treasurer for 15 years, explains that this work helped them to comply with national regulations in addition to improving knowledge of their own system.

A union worker from SINTRACUAVALLE shows us the aqueduct plans they updated.  
Photo: Madeleine Bélanger D., October 15, 2013.



The detection of leaks was another pressing concern for the network operators. Wilmer Henao, an 18-year ACUAVALLE worker and union member, participated in an exchange with La Sirena and comments that “they were very hands on” (field visit Sevilla). The union brought La Sirena plant operators up to Sevilla where they spent two days with counterparts from the town’s ACUAVALLE branch to learn how to monitor the water network and repair leaks. Carlos Andrés Cucuñame recalls: “We spent the whole night there; the day after, we woke up early and they showed us how to detect leaks. Collaboration went both ways” (focus group). Later Wilmer Henao returned to La Sirena to teach them how to repair damages.

Workers from the Sevilla branch of ACUAVALLE who capacitated the La Sirena aqueduct operators in detecting and fixing leaks.  
Photo: Madeleine Bélanger D., October 20, 2013.



The alliance also aimed to build the capacity of aqueduct workers on regulatory norms, illustrating both the practical and political nature of the skill sharing. Anyela Torres, secretary of the Subscribers Association of La Sirena, explains that, “[m]any aqueducts fear legality, but this is what can protect

them from privatization” (focus group). The aqueduct had reported to the *Superintendencia de Servicios Públicos* since 2006, but the union helped them streamline administrative tasks. SINTRACUAVALLE’s Lina Cañas took an active part in sharing her knowledge of the commercial side of water management, imparting strategies for managing the database of users, billing and collection.

At the end of the formal cooperation agreement in December 2012, SINTRACUAVALLE produced a comprehensive report offering a roadmap for future improvements, and union leader Margarita López presented the immediate results of this joint initiative before a community assembly.

### Raising environmental awareness

For its part, SINTRAMBIENTE focused on raising awareness of the importance of water conservation, initially among aqueduct staff and directors, and later with the larger community. They went on field visits to identify contamination factors in the three watersheds. They were able to show how deforestation, misuse of land due to unsustainable agriculture methods, small-scale illegal mining activities and human sprawl affected the ecosystems (Tulio Murillo, focus group). It was an opportunity “to explain the importance of conservation of those ecosystems so that comrades from the board would become custodians.” Their approach was one of empowerment: “the communities are the leaders. We only support them, advise them” (personal interview with Carlos Alberto Posada).

Tulio Murillo explains that following these visits, they realized that community members’ “vision of water provision ended with the tap” (focus group). Understanding this, they saw the need to create educational projects to help community members grasp and value the whole cycle of water conservation. Maria Fernanda Castillo led the awareness-raising work in La Sirena, giving workshops on watershed management to encourage the community to take the protection of its water source in its own hands. It was challenging, however; she comments that “our contribution is less tangible” (group interview with SINTRAMBIENTE), with no immediate, concrete results. But for Tulio Murillo this alliance sowed the seeds of a longer term community commitment to protecting ecosystems:

“[I]n the various workshops we organized we gave them the tools to do this themselves, so that they would go to the watersheds and report on anomalies... I think that it was a key contribution and we continue to try to keep them as our allies as it should be, so that from time to time they become the main actors and do not need the entity [CVC].” (focus group)

For José Noé García as well it was the beginning of a longer engagement, and following this partnership he felt that they had privileged access to the CVC, that the door would remain open for them. They had learned about sanctions to address environmental violations in the Farrallones forest reserve and intended to use those mechanisms. Indeed, they knew that threats to their source of water would be ongoing: “The environmental problem is that they are burning and cutting down

the forest to open fields in the watershed, colonizing the zone. People are moving upstream to find water and this affects La Sirena” (José Noé García, focus group). Thus, SINTRAMBIENTE workers drafted an improvement plan to help the community decide on next steps.

## Outcomes of the alliance

As part of focus group discussions conducted for this research, community and union leaders were invited to evaluate the results of the alliance and to pinpoint principles that were key to its success. When asked about principles guiding the process of a successful alliance, workers insisted on the idea that “will is the key” (Margarita López, focus group) and that workers need to participate with solidarity and humility (Olmedo Tapias, focus group).

To build trust, community members said it is essential to guarantee the autonomy and independence of the community partner, with a vision of solidarity rather than charity (*acompañamiento*). Agreement on goals, the use of clear language and transparency in the management of cooperation activities were also seen as key. Finally, delivering on set objectives was mentioned as fundamental to the success of the initiative: “it is important to be careful, to start and complete the task” (Julio César Osorio, focus group).

Whereas workers took away lessons in building solidarity and making connections with communities from the process, La Sirena leaders mentioned that they were motivated to participate in the alliance because of the learning opportunities related to operations and administration. The experience generated a desire to participate in larger efforts to defend what is public (*participación*, *socialización* and *respaldo* were the terms used most frequently), and many community members joined marches and demonstrations during and after the project. Through this process, Margarita López observes that, “The community aqueducts began to see unions in a new light; we changed the paradigm. They saw that we could help without personal interest and that unionists do not only care about themselves” (joint planning meeting).

When assessing the results of the alliance, focus group participants pointed to technical benefits, stating that the most important accomplishments of the alliance were improved efficiency in service delivery and the continuity of the service. In La Sirena, these gains were achieved by reducing unaccounted-for water thanks to simple technological solutions. Better use of water resources following the implementation of consumption controls also played a part. As concrete results of these improvements, coverage has continued to increase, and there has been no water rationing since the partnership was signed, a measure that was formerly all too common during the summer months.<sup>11</sup>

La Sirena aqueduct staff and Board stated that learning about laws and norms was especially valuable because they had no formal training in managing water systems. Thanks to capacity building on the commercial side, they improved metering techniques, billing methods and consolidated the

tariff structure following the introduction of a fixed rate to ensure that small users would not subsidize high-volume users. Tariffs remain lower than in the urban area where public provider EMCALI operates (Roa García and Pulido Roza 2014, 19). Working with the union, they were able to detect fraudulent connections and learned about legal procedures to deal with them (José Noé García, focus group). More generally, they also improved their accounting system putting them on the path to greater financial sustainability, as required by national regulation.

Importantly, this joint operational, administrative and commercial work increased overall user confidence in the service (José Noé García, focus group). According to Olmedo Tapias, the experience has “demonstrated that public and community systems are viable if well managed, if their profitability is expected to be social and not only economic” (SINTRACUAVALLE 2012).

Although much remains to be done on the environmental front, the alliance put in place some basic environmental controls. Staff from the community association monitor the watersheds regularly, and aqueduct leaders have proposed a project to create a plant nursery to restore the area. The next step is to develop a territorial planning strategy for the watershed, although resources are lacking to achieve this goal.

Overall, for José Noé García, “the learning experience was integral and comprehensive because they articulated two important things: the administrative and operational part as well as the environmental aspects” (focus group). The project also had an important spinoff: La Sirena is working with neighbouring aqueducts (Los Mangos, La Luisa and El Cascajal) to help them improve their service. They are showing them how to find and repair leaks, as learned from ACUAVALLE workers. As encouraged by SINTRAMBIENTE, they are also collaborating to protect the watersheds they all rely on. Finally, as part of AQUACOL, La Sirena has been able to share this experience and to generate significant multiplier effects.

## Replicating the model

Following their experience with La Sirena, SINTRAMBIENTE and SINTRACUAVALLE have pushed two new collaborative projects with much smaller rural communities. Carlos Alberto Posada Castañeda, a CVC worker who initiated work with Miramar and La Melba (remote mountain communities located at the foot of an important watershed), explains that water resources are insufficient to supply the needs of the community, and they must quickly find alternative sources to continue to serve their 57 subscribers. The main problems are misuse of the resource, contamination, and the enormous quantity of water lost because it is absorbed by the non-native trees that have been planted in the watershed area for logging. In September 2013, ACUAMIRAMELBA met with SINTRACUAVALLE workers in nearby Caicedonia to discuss operational needs: assistance in fixing water pipes damaged in a landslide; diagnostic assessments on high pressure in pipes; analysis of water quality; and evaluation of water availability. Olmedo Tapias visited with colleagues to collect drinking water samples, assess the system’s control structures and walk up to the watershed to take microbiological samples.

In October 2013, the community convened to hear the partnership proposal by SINTRAMBIENTE and SINTRACUAVALLE based on this assessment – a big step considering that the aqueduct was barely legalized in 2011 – and signed after heated debates. Within five months, the parties had met their objectives, resolving technical problems that were affecting the provision of water to the community.

A similar cooperation process took place in El Águila with Acueducto COSTA. This community has grown threefold since 2000 and is now serving 158 subscribers. As part of the PAAR, meters were installed, but these instigated conflicts in the community. In order to find ways to deal with such commercial challenges, board president Omar de Jesús Tabares visited La Sirena in early 2013 to learn about administration with Anyela Torres, who had been trained by SINTRACUAVALLE. It was also an opportunity to see how water is disinfected. Margarita López explains that it was the most helpful way to share knowledge because “La Sirena is strong where we are deficient, SINTRACUAVALLE doesn’t know small systems” (field visit, Sevilla). Discussions to formalize an agreement between the aqueduct and unions continued and it was signed in November 2013, during the final workshop organized as part of our participatory research.

## Conclusions

Public sector unions in Colombia have actively defended alternatives to privatization, well beyond the narrow interests of their members. In the water sector, they have joined forces with NGOs, environmental activists and citizen movements in developing anti-privatization strategies. Our case study of the labour-community alliance between La Sirena, SINTRACUAVALLE and SINTRAMBIENTE shows that this early initiative in defence of public water has served to strengthen both local management of this essential service and to build solidarity between unions and communities, encouraging the development of more such alliances.

However, for all their potential, labour-community alliances such as the one established in La Sirena have limitations. In addition to difficulties linked with funding, one of the main challenges is organizational. It is daunting to try to coordinate between unions that have different mandates (e.g. environmental protection and water delivery); even internally, each of these unions faces its own tensions and contradictions. SINTRACUAVALLE has benefited from strong institutional backing from ACUAVALLE’s management; but it has been harder for SINTRAMBIENTE to gain recognition for its social work from the CVC, complicated by the fact that the union is a larger, national-level entity and is more fragmented territorially (personal interview with Harold Humberto).

Even more difficult is cooperation between unions and communities, due to the fact that they have distinct organizational forms and capacities. In our case study, the communities’ deep mistrust of organized workers, characterized within Colombian society as constituting a ‘labour aristocracy,’ coupled with their fierce defence of local water systems from external control loomed large in

efforts to facilitate cooperation. But in the end workers helped to reinforce the community aqueduct's autonomy by taking concrete steps to erect operational and legal safeguards. They did so despite significant differences with their own public enterprise model, recognizing the importance of the community-owned water systems as functioning and culturally appropriate alternatives to privatization.

The greatest challenge, however, is that genuine exchange and reciprocity between unions and communities needs to overcome the reality that these organizations are in an inherently asymmetrical relationship, since unions have stronger formal organizational, human and financial resources (albeit insufficient for the great needs of the population), and often have more political influence than community organizations. Recognizing these inherent differences and imbalances, let alone dealing with them, makes labour-community alliances a test of political will from the start. Nonetheless, this type of collaboration has the potential to foster better appreciation of the unique contributions of community aqueducts, such as their vision of the commons, responsible consumption, economic solidarity and self-government.

Finally, labour-community alliances are often *ad hoc*, and ensuring their long-term sustainability can be difficult. The pressing need for mass support often arises when the union is weakened and workers' capacity to fund community work is limited. In the case of SINTRACUAVALLE, workers recognized that it was the "best time to engage, but the worst financial moment" (Lina Cañas, joint planning meeting) given that workers have been forced to accept concessions, mostly with regard to pensions. SINTRAMBIENTE also acknowledged that building environmental consciousness would not happen overnight, yet the union's action in La Sirena was short term. This immediateness may also partly explain the difficulty in problematizing equity and gender as key transversal objectives in the alliance.<sup>12</sup> Despite being a possible first step, the case presented here cannot yet be characterized as a sustained, mutually beneficial, democratic and participatory 'deep coalition' with the potential to effect lasting change (Tattersall 2005).

Considering how challenging it was to bring together a relatively small and dedicated set of volunteers to pursue clearly defined short-term goals in La Sirena, it will not be easy to broaden such alliances. Our case study shows that so far unions have preferred to replicate the model in very small communities where it is easier to navigate local politics and where they can set objectives that yield immediate results. What this experience suggests is that a first successful alliance as set in La Sirena can provide a model and generate the necessary trust to come to other agreements more quickly elsewhere.

These observations confirm other experiences of labour-community coalitions, such as those formed in South Africa in the early 2000s. In the case of the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF), for example, organizational, institutional and political differences between unions and community organizations resulted in great difficulties in organizing and mobilizing campaigns, eventually contributing to the breakdown of the alliance (Lier and Stokke 2006; McKinley 2014; Xali 2005). A separate but related



coalition formed under the APF to counter the privatization of water in Johannesburg in 2001, in the context of the fragmenting effects of political decentralization and economic liberalization, faced similar obstacles (Barchiesi 2007). The construction and maintenance of a collective, working class identity which extends beyond formal sector and unionized workers is exceptionally difficult in the context of ongoing neoliberal restructuring, as the priorities and needs of different sections of the working class often come into conflict. For example, tensions arise when unemployed workers accept casual jobs previously performed by unionized workers (Millstein and Lier 2012). Building strong and resilient working class solidarities to combat this fragmentation across organizational lines is a key element of working class organizing.

It will not be easy to reproduce the model developed in Valle del Cauca elsewhere, but we think that three main lessons can be gleaned from our research for the development of labour-community alliances around the world. First, an alliance is only a first step in creating solidarity over the longer term. It is an empowerment tool that, in this case, contributed to both the betterment of the community aqueduct and residents' material circumstances, as well as a learning process of movement building that has deep roots in struggles for public services in Colombia (see Novelli 2010; Perera 2013). Through cooperation, the social, environmental and political vision of all actors involved is enriched, and solid foundations are laid for alternatives.

Second, in demonstrating that non-state public water provision is possible, such local initiatives constitute compelling examples of alternatives to privatization within a larger political struggle. While achieving practical goals, the case presented here has also contributed to the building of a wider political movement in a number of ways: through the revitalization and reframing of union priorities and concerns, expanding them beyond the workplace; by inspiring participation in direct action in support of public services; and through the development of union-community solidarities and collective identities around the defence of public service provision. It is thus disconcerting that these types of initiatives have not yet garnered the broad national support necessary to scale them up (communication with Juan Camilo Mira).

Third, in a globalized world, systemic change requires engagement at levels above the local. Our case study and other research projects have demonstrated the importance of transnational support in local labour struggles to defend public services in Colombia (Novelli 2011). In turn, local alternatives feed those active in the global struggle to advance public options to neoliberal restructuring and the privatization of public services. The regional water networks Red VIDA and Plataforma-APC as well as the international federation of public sector unions PSI have contributed as much as they have benefited from the success of the labour-community alliance in La Sirena. The experience allows them to show that there are alternatives and to spark action elsewhere. Members of Plataforma-APC have since launched various cooperation agreements across Latin America that have a lot of potential to create solidarity across national borders and across boundaries among different forms of civil society organizations. As one participant in our research put it, it is round one in the "ants' fight against the elephant."

## Endnotes

- 1 All translations from the original Spanish were done by the authors.
- 2 In rural areas coverage is 69.6 per cent for sanitation and 69.5 per cent for water (Vargas Nuñez 2013).
- 3 Community-community partnerships have also been emerging across the country in the water sector. Many receive vital support from activists.
- 4 Even though the term 'public-community partnership' is broadly used to define this type of cooperation, we prefer using the word 'alliance' in this context for two main reasons. First, the 'public-community partnership' category is broad and can include agreements between city councils and communities as promoted by Plataforma-APC in Antioquia, for example (see Márquez Valderrama 2012, 8). Secondly, the term 'alliance' allows us to anchor our research in the literature on 'labour-community alliances', which provides a useful theoretical framework.
- 5 Created in 2003 by 54 organizations from 16 countries in the Americas to defend water as a common good and human right. See <http://laredvida.org/>
- 6 Seven participants, including five from SINTRACUVALLE and two from SINTRAMBIENTE; three were union leaders and four were workers; in total, five men and two women.
- 7 Twelve participants, including five former and current members from the Board, two plant operators, the secretary, three subscribers, one representative of AQUACOL; in total, five women and seven men.
- 8 Thirteen participants from the two unions and three aqueducts (La Sirena, Costa, Acumiramelba); in total, two women and 11 men.
- 9 Despite their strong opposition to privatization, the unions from other public water operators (e.g. EPM in Medellín) have not reached out to community aqueducts in the same way. What is more, some of the Autonomous Regional Corporations that form the National Environmental System have at times supported the privatization of community aqueducts (e.g. Corantioquia) (communication with Marcela López).
- 10 Union members had the advantage of being able to take days off work to undertake some activities related to the alliance, but most of it was done on their own time. Aqueduct board members who took part were not paid at all so they were doing this strictly for their community.
- 11 The fact that the last two years (2011-2013) have been the rainiest in many years in Colombia could partially explain this as well.
- 12 For example, only three women were involved in the alliance with La Sirena, and the board of the aqueduct is composed only of men.

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### Joint research planning, field visits and focus groups

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- Participatory research planning meeting with the community aqueduct (4 participants and 2 SINTRACUAVALLE observers), La Sirena, Oct. 15, 2013.
- Focus group unions (7 participants: 5 SINTRACUAVALLE, 2 SINTRAMBIENTE), Cali, Oct. 21, 2013.
- Focus group community aqueduct (12 participants including an AQUACOL observer), La Sirena, Oct. 24, 2013.
- Field visit to ACUAVALLE's Sevilla branch and to the community aqueduct ACUAMIRAMELBA with SINTRACUAVALLE and SINTRAMBIENTE (5 participants), Oct. 20, 2013.
- Group interview with SINTRAMBIENTE (4 participants), Cali, Oct. 28, 2013.
- Workshop with unions and three acueductos comunitarios (13 participants: 4 SINTRACUAVALLE, 1 SINTRAMBIENTE, 4 La Sirena, 3 COSTA, 1 ACUAMIRAMELBA), Buga, Nov. 9, 2013.

### Interviews

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