

# From Mediation to Mobilisation: Lessons from an unsuccessful experience

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to summarise a set of findings from an assessment process, which intended to review the traditional management approach of the Argentinean NGO, Comité de Cuencas and specifically a project named "Limpieza de los arroyos". The interest of the case study lies in the description of a conflicting situation that emerged during the participatory assessment process (MPA), which eventually led to the termination of the project.

This on-going action research is relevant because these results can be used as a challenge in the water and sanitation sector given that:

- The team intervention is in itself part of the problem, for it spurred latent conflicts;
- This type of conflictive situation is a common feature of several Argentinean NGOs, which are dependent on the resources and voluntary work of their members.

The basic objectives of the assessment process were to contribute to the transformation of a mainstream practice into a participatory one in order to:

- Empower the organisation by demonstrating that community participation is essential to make the projects succeed.
- Raise community awareness on problems related to water management with the aim to increase their commitment to participate in an NGO project.

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of "learning alliances" to build upon the success of the project by developing social interactions between the main actors involved in water issues at different levels (local and regional).

## Presentation of the problem

The NGO was concerned by the lack of community participation in the development phase of their new project. Their main interest was to scale up the MPA approach in the region (Buenos Aires) and combine it with their twofold work plan:

- In the first phase, a internal evaluation by the members of the methodologies and practices used by the NGO in the development of their activities.
- In the second phase, to work on the design of a participatory strategy to launch the project 'Contaminación con plaguicidas y su impacto epidemiológico', in order to encourage community participation in planning and management.

Due to several internal conflicts in the organisation during the development of the first phase, a group of members decided to stop participating in the activities, as a consequence the second phase was abandoned shortly after it started.

Before describing the methodology applied and the sources of conflict, a short description of the socio-demographic characteristics in the region of intervention of the NGO are provided.

## **The region and its communities**

The NGO Comité de Cuencas develops its activities in a peri-urban region of the Province of Buenos Aires, which extends along the watercourses Carnaval and Martín and comprises approximately 44 km<sup>2</sup>. In this area, three different neighbourhoods are located: San Jorge, Barrio Rincón, and Los Porteños. All three communities have different characteristics and there is almost no social interaction between them.

San Jorge is populated by a mixture of working- and middle-class people, who own or rent appropriate housing facilities. This population is completely integrated in the labour market. The only main problem of this area is floods, which result from the lack of maintenance and proper planning along the watercourses.

By contrast, the neighbourhood of Barrio Rincón is populated by people segregated from the formal labour market: Many are unemployed, and most experience acute poverty. The pattern of housing is characterised by irregular, low-cost, self-constructed housing typical of Latin American shanty towns. This community faces two main problems: Floods and lack of clean water and sanitation.

Finally, Los Porteños is 4 km away from access to the rest of the area including the other two neighbourhoods, and consists mainly of small farms where vegetables are produced. The vast majority of the population are young males who have migrated from Bolivia. They constitute the labour force of this small-scale agricultural production system and live in precarious conditions of subsistence on the farms where they work. In this neighbourhood, the main problems concern the lack of clean water and sanitation facilities as well as contamination of the watercourses by the pesticides used for productive purposes (mainly agriculture). This factor has caused special epidemiologic concerns and has induced the NGO to act upon this problem. The contamination spreads over the streams and affects mainly the poor who lack access to clean water supply and to decent sanitation facilities.

## **The NGO: Comité de Cuencas**

The NGO was set up by a group of people from San Jorge who decided to take action to sort out the problem of the flooding. The group then started to extend their area of interest and activity, particularly on water issues, and to a lesser extent environmental issues. Those activities are conducted through voluntary work and private resources of its members, apart from those occasions on which the group received support from the Municipal delegation. The NGO staff is comprised of 12 people, 3 of whom hold the committee positions of President, Vice-President and Secretary of the organisation. Their professional backgrounds are: Economists, engineers, doctors, geographers, lawyers and teachers.

The administrative procedures and decision-making processes of the organisation are rudimentary and highly informal. Basically, decisions are taken during general gatherings in which the majority of the group participates. However, most of the time decisions are strongly influenced by the founding members, particularly the President and the Secretary.

The NGO has had a historical relationship with the Municipal representatives and recently reached an agreement with the University of La Plata, they were committed to carry out the analysis needed to measure the levels of water contamination and the spread of related epidemiological diseases.

## **Methodology**

In order to review its working methodology, the NGO set up two main activities directed at assessing the project "Limpieza de los arroyos". First, the NGO decided to discuss collectively the mission, vision and methodology of the organisation, with the help of a semi-structured skeleton designed by the research team. Participants expressed their opinions and gave arguments, which were recorded and summarised at the end of the meeting.

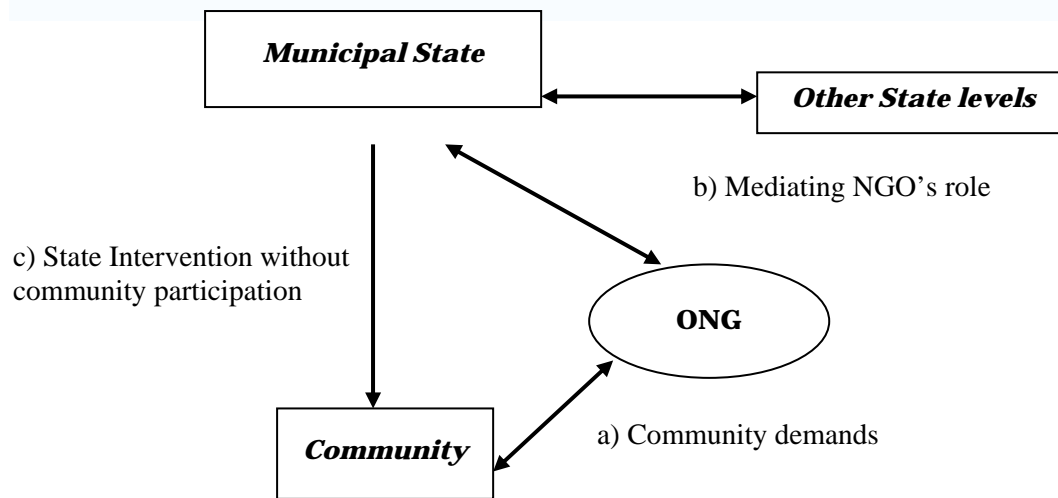
Secondly after the meeting ended, the group worked on the summarised conclusions in order to suggest lines of action for revitalising community participation in the running of the project. They used a technique called 'espina de pescado' (fish spine), which is similar to the MPA 'ladders' exercise for ranking and prioritising different activities, problems, lines of action, and so forth. Possibly, because a group hesitated during the activities about the issue of whether or not the NGO should reconsider its population targets, a poverty map was drawn up and interviews in the different neighbourhoods were carried out to identify specific social and community needs.

## **Six outcomes of the participatory assessment**

### **1. Appraisal of the traditional participatory model**

The first outcome of the collective assessment was an appraisal of the relationship between the local communities, the NGO and the local structures of the Municipal State. Basically, the group concluded that the NGO has historically played a mediating role between the community's needs, demands and the State's intervention. However, this role of managing community needs, articulated as practical demands, neither empowers the local community nor encourages people's participation.

**Figure 1: Traditional Model of Community Participation**



## 2. Project Assessment: "Limpieza de los arroyos"

The main objective of the project was to solve the frequent floods occurring during the rainy season due to the accumulation of solid waste in the watercourse.

Three key areas were identified which caused the problem:

### a. Methods of integration in the project

It was defined as selective, and mainly focused on the most privileged community of San Jorge, without any attempt to involve the rest of the community. Meetings were convened through local communities.

### b. Institutional relationships

The criticisms replicated the general concern about the relationships established between the management of the project and the relation between the NGO and the Municipal local representative, which are deemed to reinforce the mediating role of the organisation inhibiting truly communitarian participation and emancipation. In this particular case, the use of public social plans obtained by the Municipal representatives is key to the solution of the problem because they mediate between the Municipal and Provincial government. They redistribute the NGO funded material and paid the workers in charge of cleaning the watercourse. These workers were chosen arbitrarily, and without any say or input from the community.

### c. Social Outputs

According to the collective assessment, the outcomes of the traditional redistribution practice can be summarised as follows:

- Using the community as a pressure group,

- Strengthening of traditional patronising mechanisms of Argentinean local politics, which emphasize the fact that communities are passive actors.

Community participation faded away once the Municipal delegation gave up at this stage and promised to set up a social plan to remunerate the work involved. Consequently, these dynamics resulted in the absence of monitoring activities, and a lack of sustainability. People in charge of cleaning and treating the solid waste left their activities as soon as they got better job opportunities.

Therefore, there was no transfer of knowledge, skills and experience to the other members of the community. The material used to clean the river broke down due to poor maintenance and lack of motivation of the labour force. At present, the project has come to a halt. The community is unaware of the current situation and has therefore not reacted.

To summarize, some members of the NGO concluded:

In this project the existing social and environmental conditions were reproduced because the organisation focused its activities mainly on the most privileged area without empowering the communities or encouraging participation or lobbying the State.

### 3. Methodological conclusions

Due to the findings of the assessment exercise, the NGO considered it vital to involve the community in order to revitalise the project "Limpieza de los arroyos". This would only be possible if traditional practices were abandoned and involvement of the community in the project was improved by raising awareness, improving communication, monitoring and commitment.

### 4. Project assessment: "Contaminación con plaguicidas y su impacto epidemiológico"

After the assessment, the group focused its work on defining actions to overcome the limitations of the traditional approach when launching the new project.

The decisions taken were:

- to approach the poorest communities in order to get qualitative information on the epidemiological impact on the population, on the contamination of the watercourses and on the willingness of communities to participate in the project;
- to collectively create a Planning Guide specifying tasks and responsibilities;
- to raise communities' awareness through workshops facilitated by professionals from the local University, who collaborate on certain technical aspects of the project ;
- to widen the process of decision-making by organising a monthly meeting in which neighbours and key social actors participate;
- to set up mechanisms for rotation of management tasks in order to ensure broader participation, and guarantee a transfer of knowledge and collective monitoring.

### 5. Towards a new working methodology

The NGO planned three activities to start shaping the new methodological approach. Unfortunately, due to internal conflicts only a few of them can be mentioned in this case study.

To begin with, it was decided to launch a process of self-education in MPA and other participatory approaches by reading a bibliography, which was later collectively debated. As a result, the group agreed:

- to work in an user-friendly language to improve communication with the less educated communities;
- to determine the achievement of community ownership in the project as a criteria for success in future projects,
- to define participatory management tools according to feasible and specific objectives.

Two community meetings were organised, one in El Rincón and the other one in Los Porteños, which included mainly the poorest members of both communities.

Firstly, the NGO presented the objectives of the project. Following this presentation, several groups were selected by taking into account the participation of some members of Comité de Cuencas.

The activities required to carry out the project were collectively debated, as well as the identification of potential problems and possible solutions. Then, all the participants gathered in assembly, presented to each group the outcomes of their discussions and prioritised the problems using individual voting.

From the point of view of the NGO's participants, the activity was useful to:

- identify the community's commitment to the objectives of the project;
- draw the conclusion that the less money there is the more community involvement is required;
- reinforce their own belief in the potential to change their traditional participatory approach.

There were plans to officially launch the project by organising a multi-stakeholder platform inviting community representatives, local activists from political parties, local Municipal representatives, civil servants from the Health Ministry, farm owners of Los Porteños, and staff of the local University. However, this event was cancelled when the project came to a halt.

## 6. New perspectives: The role of gender in participatory approaches

Despite all the problems which led to the project's failure, it is still worth pointing out the positive outcome of the aborted experience. The NGO's acknowledgment that the role of gender was neglected when addressing poverty and social change was a victory.

The NGO concluded that given the situation on the labour market in the region, women ended up in El Rincón and Los Porteños, as key players in shaping community life. Their discrimination from the labour market is not mirrored at the level of everyday life of the communities. Women have the authority and the knowledge on community needs and should therefore be given a voice.

In both meetings, they were not only the majority, but also the main participants who clearly identified problems, suggested actions, and were willing to participate. Ironically, despite the discrimination that they experienced in the labour market and in the domestic units, women coordinate well the needed collective actions and the leadership of the community.

Indeed, NGO members really appreciated that women developed the functioning of the solidarity networks within these communities, and hence, it was agreed that any change in their participatory approach should take gender into account. To conclude, gender was considered both a problem of inequality and discrimination, but also as an enabling and emancipating factor during the project.

### **The limits of experience: the source of conflict**

It is crucial to emphasise that the internal conflicts were gradually emerging from the activities. Thus, it was assumed in the beginning that the members of the NGO had the shared aim of putting their working methodology up for collective scrutiny; the research team was not informed about internal differences. However, after stating that, it is necessary to recognise that the intervention unwillingly prompted latent conflicts. The first tensions were evident when the group discussed the mission, vision and methodology of the organisation, even though all participants agreed on the broad picture. Instead, the assessment of the project 'Limpieza de los arroyos', resulted in a group deciding to give up the activity due to disagreements. However, after some hesitations, the research team decided to continue because the group willing to carry on, had shown strong commitment to the project's further development, and were in fact, close to launching the project anyway. Besides this conflict, the conclusion at that moment was that the group had arrived at a de facto division of labour which would not seriously damage the development of the experience.

### **The five identified sources of conflict were:**

#### **1. Funding**

The main cause of conflict, which became clear at the end, related to differences on how to finance the new project. The NGO had entered the project in a public call organised by the Ministerio de Salud de la Nación (National Health Ministry). The project won a prize, and at that moment, the NGO was waiting for funds, which would be used to cover the expenses of the epidemiological analysis and other operative costs (excluding wages). This situation resulted in the first open disagreement.

While the group who presented the project at the contest argued that it was essential to get funds to continue activities in order to achieve an efficient project, other members were opposed to this approach. They claimed that because these funds were provided by the State, this would introduce political interests into the NGO. However, once this difference was discussed, the NGO finally agreed, unenthusiastically, to submit the project.

#### **2. The personal dimension and the relation with the local State**

Following this disagreement, it is important to note that the group opposing the presentation to the Ministerio de Salud de la Nación, had a historical link with the

local Municipal delegate through their personal networks. This emphasised that the conflict exploded due to the organisations' political interests (from either local or national level).

In fact, the project "Contaminación con plaguicidas y su impacto epidemiológico" was awarded in an open and public call whereas before, the NGO had accessed indirect means of financial support through personal relationships with the local Municipal delegate. Thus, it is possible to infer that the real problems occurred due to changes in the traditional form of interaction between the NGO and the local authorities; both, the leaders of the NGO and the local authorities felt threatened by these developments and were afraid it would reduce their historical basis of power.

### 3. The relationship with the local communities

Another source of conflict was the definition of the target population. Until recently, the NGO had focused its work in San Jorge. However, the new project "Contaminación con plaguicidas y su impacto epidemiológico", was in itself a challenge that explicitly questioned this focus, stating the need to move towards the poorest communities. The epidemiological problem affected Barrio Rincón, and particularly Los Porteños, and impacts were less important in San Jorge. The social dimension of the environmental problems was also a new issue for the NGO, whose traditional ecological vision did not integrate poverty into this approach.

### 4. Methodology

As previously mentioned above, the research team assumed as a common objective the will to review their methodological approach. Through this change, and as the intervention developed further, the different perceptions existing within the organisation soon became clear and caused even more differences.

Thus far, the NGO favoured organisational survival over internal differences. In the case of the project "Limpieza de los arroyos", for instance, there were heated discussions about whether or not to accept the social plan offered by the Municipal delegation. This plan wanted to reward the neighbours who carried out activities within the project.

However, according to the members who questioned these practices, they were not able to see in how far these practices contributed to reproducing a charitable and traditional participatory approach. As a result, no alternative methodologies were offered to replace the traditional ones.

The shift happened only when the group decided to approach the poorest communities, and began to work on the design of the new project. Being in contact with the reality on the ground, the need to implement new methodological tools became obvious. At this moment, the NGO approached the research team.

### 5. The end of the project

All these sources of conflict and differences resulted in the termination of the participation of some group members and their refusal to sign the contract. As a consequence, the funds were withdrawn and the project could not be developed.

The explicit alliance between the leadership of the NGO and the local authorities came to the surface when the new actors (University and even the research team) joined the project, and new sources of funding became available. This new dynamic posed a threat to their traditional mediating role, as schematised in figure 1.

After this incident, the group of members who advocated for change decided to leave the NGO in search of new methodological tools and organisational forms. They wanted to encourage the collective identification of local problems and to develop community participation to find appropriate solutions.

The process was ended by holding an open meeting where the dissident group informed the community they could not continue the project. They also suggested setting up a committee consisting of community's representatives, professionals from the University, and local authorities, to look for opportunities for alternative funding.

### **The notion of learning alliances: A way out?**

A 'Learning Alliance' is a concept which emphasizes the importance of bringing different institutional levels (national, district, community, or otherwise) and key players who have a strong interest in bringing innovation and production of knowledge with a shared interest together.

This approach might create open conflicts due to different organisational approaches but the aim is to use the alliance as a platform for conflict resolution.

Bringing stakeholders together has to create the conditions in which actors may combine their specific capabilities, create shared knowledge, and appropriate it in a flexible way to transform Argentinean innovation into local practice. In this way, Learning Alliances can contribute to the empowerment of actors, which allows them to implement technical, managerial, or organisational innovation.

Why can Learning Alliances be relevant in this case? Mainly because the results found by the research team: the Comité de Cuencas failed to acknowledge the organic relationships between any NGO and its environment. Working through a learning alliance could have helped to develop the relationships between different communities, the University, and different institutional levels of the State. This partnership could have brought changes in the micro-politics of the organisation as the interrelation could also avoid the traditional practices (unilateral decision making). Conflicts in this particular case were not only an internal affair due to the clash of methodological perspectives, but an outcome of the relationships between stakeholders when logic and dynamics began to be jeopardized and when a hitherto passive group of members started pursuing alternatives strategies.

The intervention focused on debating and testing a set of tools in a conflict-free field. The tensions arising as soon as the activities unfolded were initially thought of as minor, as a simple lack of interest due to a sort of organisational division of labour. When the conflict manifested itself openly, it was too late. At this stage, the research team was completely associated with the innovative group which resulted in some members quitting the activities.

From the beginning, instead of focusing the intervention on the dynamics within the NGO, the objective should have been to gather the different actors in order to promote collective action for the development of a pro-poor, community-based project. That said the conflicts undoubtedly arose in a wider framework of social interactions.

Presumably, in this collective framework, the identification of problems, the definition of common aims, and the interaction of different perspectives could have contributed to create the necessary conditions to ease the actors' mistrusts and fears. Hence, a Learning Alliances approach to identifying project priorities using participatory methods could have guided key actors to collectively identify suitable and sustainable lines of action.