

Empowering Stakeholders to Co-manage Natural Resources



Community participation is recognized as an essential part of equitable and sustainable watershed management. However, meaningful participation is difficult to achieve when communities are unorganized, unaware of their legal rights and responsibilities, and lacking the information, education and confidence necessary to interact with other more powerful stakeholders.

Since upstream land use affects water quality and quantity downstream, residents may suffer (or benefit) as a result of actions of those living upstream (Swallow *et al.*, 2006). In theory, community or stakeholder participation in watershed management can be a solution to these problems.

If stakeholders are involved in decision-making, they are more likely to reach agreements that are mutually acceptable and therefore respected (FAO 2006). In practice, the power inequities between different stakeholder groups often make it difficult for them to interact on a level playing field.



A research project of the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), Sustaining Inclusive Collective Action that Links Economic and Ecological Scales (SCALES) in the Upper Watershed, was designed to help make explicit the relationship between collective action, scales and poverty.

The Conversatorio de Accion Ciudadana (CAC) methodology, originally developed by La Corporacion Asesoría para el Desarrollo (ASDES), a Colombian NGO and first implemented by WWF Colombia in the 1990s, received special attention under SCALES.

CAC: Collective approach to natural resource management

CAC is a politicolegal mechanism for achieving meaningful participation by civil society. It is based on the idea of civil society and authorities conversing in familiar terms about issues of importance to both and arriving at agreements for action. The methodology consists of three phases: preparation, negotiation and follow-up. It is designed to address the inequities in power and information between communities and government institutions that make it difficult for communities to exercise their constitutional rights to participate and

to hold their representatives accountable.

CAC's point of entry is the Colombian constitution and the rights and responsibilities that citizens are entitled to but often do not know how to use. Trainings are conducted to teach individuals to use concrete legal instruments to obtain information or compel government agencies to promptly fulfill their obligations. This is accompanied by efforts to build social capital and increase people's knowledge of their natural resources. While the focus is on the community, training courses are also offered for public servants. This is because, in reality, many of them are also unaware of their roles and responsibilities under the constitution. This is especially true in relation to citizens' participation.

The three-pronged (environmental, social and legal) capacity building or 'preparation' phase culminates in a 1-day public meeting. In this meeting, communities invite representatives of the authorities whose mandates include the key social and environmental issues identified by the communities in the preparation phase. A structured negotiation takes place, leading to a signed agreement by representatives of institutions to undertake specific actions to improve social welfare and natural resource management. In the follow-up phase of the CAC, community representatives ensure that institutions comply with their commitments.

Varying ways of implementing CAC

While the CACs followed the same general methodology, each was implemented in a slightly different way due to differences in the lead organizations, the social, political and biophysical contexts, the available resources, and the level of support from organizations such as ASDES and WWF.

The specific interventions that the CACs undertook to increase human capital included trainings on legal rights and how to exercise them; hands-on analysis of environmental issues such as water quality, soil erosion or loss of biodiversity; workshops on identifying and analyzing problems and formulating solutions; and, especially for those who were “questioners” in the CAC itself, coaching on how to formulate questions, arguments and counter arguments, and how to speak in public.

In some cases such as in Fuquene, the main contribution to social capital occurred when participants from different communities came together to do training activities. Fundación Humedales developed a series of games to demonstrate legal and environmental concepts to people with low levels of formal education. In Coello, the coordinators were able to undertake activities such as a regional Water Forum, and the highly successful Coello Expedition, in which 40 people from all parts of the watershed spent 4 days following the river from its origin in the páramo to its outlet, learning first-hand about the watershed and about each other.

In both SCALES communities, economic experiments were conducted both as a research activity to better understand the factors that support or inhibit collective action in watersheds and as a development activity in which watershed residents participate as “players” in “games” or scenarios designed to reflect the actual incentives people face when deciding how to use resources that have both individual and social costs and benefits (Cardenas and Ostrom, 2004). The games made explicit the incentives for and against cooperation and generated discussion on how to address the constraints to collective action.

CACs have been conducted in three Colombian watersheds between 2004 and 2007:

1. Fuquene, October 2004 - February 2007 (SCALES project)
2. Coello, December 2005 - May 2007 (SCALES project)
3. Güiza, October 2004 - October 2006 (WWF and partners)

The types of impact considered under CAC are:

1. Agreement signed on the day of the meeting;
2. Human and social capital impacts among participants from communities;

Signed agreements

The CAC in Güiza, held on October 28, 2006, was the best attended. In addition to the institutional representatives, the state governor and two mayors were in attendance.

The meeting was held in the state capital rather than in the watershed itself. Thirty agreements were signed with 13 institutions, including municipalities, the environmental authority, and departments such as health, agriculture and planning (Cantillo and Gonzalez, 2008c). Though most agreements were nonmonetary, a total of more than US\$1.7 million was committed for activities such as watershed planning, water and sanitation, health and agriculture.

* Dates cover preparation and negotiation process

3. Relationships between communities and public institutions.

Impacts on poverty and the environment are not addressed since these are of a long-term nature. However, implications for these kinds of impact can be inferred from the shorter term impacts that are presented.

members who participated and led to changes in the ways that communities and institutions perceive each other, in some cases, moving from antagonism to respectful collaboration.

- ◆ While estimating an economic rate of return is beyond the scope of this assessment, relative to the size of the investment made in carrying out the CACs, the impacts appear to be large, indicating a high rate of return.

Outcomes

The CAC methodology, as implemented in three Colombian watersheds between 2004 and 2007, led to 76 concrete commitments on the part of institutions to improve the welfare of watershed residents and the management of watershed resources.

- ◆ An assessment in late 2007 showed that compliance rates were relatively high, especially in the communities that had stronger follow-up processes.
- ◆ The CAC methodology also had significant human and social capital impacts on community

Lessons learned

- ◆ The main lesson from this experience is that a CAC takes time. The SCALES project initially estimated that the preparation phase would take 3-6 months. In reality, it took a year and a half and even then, had it not been for the SCALES project deadlines, more time could have been used to properly prepare the communities and make the institutional contacts. Resource limitations were a part of this, but the main explanation was simply that the methodology was being applied in the local contexts by the local partners for the first time, which



made it difficult to estimate the time needed. The methodological guide being produced by the WWF and partners provides more detail for organizations interested in implementing the methodology to enable them to plan accordingly. (Candelo et al. 2008)

- ◆ Partnership with a committed local organization. Perhaps the most critical determinant of success is the presence of a committed local organization with experience in community organization. In Fuquene and Coello, the lead NGOs were relatively local in their scope prior to the CAC, but were interested in working at higher scales to address watershed issues. As such, both succeeded in increasing the recognition at the watershed scale and increasing their visibility.
- ◆ Experience has its influence. SCALES project partners had experience in Fuquene and Coello prior to the initiation of the SCALES project. In Fuquene, the experience was more of a research nature, and as a result there was more information and analysis available on the environmental and socioeconomic issues in the watershed. In Coello, experience had a research and a community development component and this appears to have provided a stronger base for the CAC.
- ◆ Link early with the public institutions to be invited to the CAC. Involving them in the process leads to more meaningful participation in the negotiation phase. This is important both for public and private sector actors. In neither CAC did the major private sector actors—e.g. dairy and potato farmers in Fuquene or rice farmers and CEMEX in Coello—play a major role. The basic CAC methodology is focused on communities and public institutions. However, the private sector is increasingly important in watershed management and innovative ways of engaging them need to be explored.
- ◆ Importance of community involvement. The impacts of the CAC will be larger and will likely be more widely distributed if more community members can be involved. A core team will always lead the process, however, so more emphasis can be put on having them share progress and seek feedback from their communities. Increasing the presence of the general public at the CAC itself will also make it clear to the public institutions that the people asking questions have the support of their communities.

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Partner Organizations

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Consortio para el Desarrollo Sostenible de la Ecoregion Andina (CONDESAN), Peru
Fundación Humedales, Colombia
International Food Policy Research Institute
Semillas de Agua, Chile
World Agroforestry Center
World Wildlife Fund, Colombia

Key Reference

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