

Uruguay: Privatisation with Protest¹

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In two economically and socially different Uruguayan communities, women are leading two different fights against one common enemy: water privatisation.

In the department of Maldonado, water service was not considered a problem until it was privatised in a process that faced popular resistance, lacked any formal public consultation, and was supported only by the hotel industry, large landowners, and big government. The decision to privatise the water in Maldonado was made by the authorities responsible for the management of the water resources (Administracion de las Obras Sanitarias del Estado – OSE) and the municipality (Intendencia Municipal de Maldonado – IMM). Foremost, though, the decision to privatise followed executive branch policy which has been shaped by agreements with international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Two companies took part in the privatisation: in the city of Maldonado the private operator is URAGUA (subsidiary of the Spanish company Aguas de Bilbao), and in the beach zone (on the Atlantic coast) the private operator is Aguas de la Costa (subsidiary of the gigantic multinational, Suez). The majority of the population in the city of Maldonado is composed of workers, while the beach zone is populated mostly by wealthy, property-owning tourists (who live there for three or four months during the summer season).

Due to the differences between these two populations, the reactions to privatisation have been somewhat different. In the beach zone the complaints of the population have centred on the quality and price of the water. The motto of the neighbourhood organisation is “Water Yes, Robbery No!”. In the poorer areas of Maldonado the action of the neighbourhood organisations has centred on the fight to defend the community standpipes.

The community standpipes were installed in different zones around the country by the public water and sanitation ministry (OSE) to assure that potable water was available in areas that lacked piped water to households. The cost of the community standpipes (whose installation is the responsibility of OSE) is assumed by the municipalities. In both of the zones in Maldonado where the private companies operate, their first action was the elimination of the community standpipes. This was a strategy designed to make people pay the high fee demanded by the private companies for the installation of a household connection. In the wealthier beach zones, the private companies managed to remove the community standpipes without many problems, but in the poorer areas citizens were unable to pay the connection fees and were faced with the loss of water service.

The solutions of the inhabitants of the two zones have been based to some extent on their respective socio-economic situations. In the wealthier zones some have excavated their own

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artesian wells (with some degree of insecurity, since the legalities of “self-supply” of water are unclear) and others have chosen to develop a system of rainwater harvesting as their primary source of supply. In these cases, women came to the fore as those responsible for an affordable water supply. The use of wells and rainwater harvesting has required complementary work between men and women. However, the maintenance and cleaning of the rainwater tanks has primarily been the work of women. And, in cases where there is not sufficient water, when water must be transported from other zones, this has primarily been the work and responsibility of women and children.

In the poorer areas in the city of Maldonado the reactions have been different. Women have put up fierce resistance to the elimination of the community standpipes. In the District San Antonio III, an establishment located to the north of the city of Maldonado, the elimination of the community standpipe was announced almost immediately after the private company took over. The neighbourhood commission of San Antonio, which is run primarily by women and has provided nearly ten years of valuable community work, successfully lobbied the local authorities to maintain the community tap, and the water supplies to the district were continued even though the cost of the service is the responsibility of the municipality (IMM).

In the District San Antonio III, there are approximately 90 families, 60 per cent of which have female heads of households. The community standpipe in the neighbourhood not only supplies water to these families, but also to neighbours from other districts where the community standpipes have been removed or household water connections have been cut off due to the inability to pay the high water rates.

Norma Bentin, one of the members of the commission of San Antonio, and an activist due to the harsh conditions of her own life, runs a food programme for the children in the neighbourhood. She commented that many people rely on the community standpipes, and even with the community standpipes, there are many water-borne diseases and hygiene problems due to the lack of potable water. However, she recognized that she had not realized the importance of the installation of these community standpipes until they received the notice from the private company that they were going to be shut down.

Here, the communities women have come together to organise informal piping from the community standpipe to some of the other homes. Thus, the community succeeded in managing its own water, but due to a lack of resources the quality of the service has still been very low. The service supplied by the water company ends at the community standpipe, and the people of the neighbourhood must organise themselves to ensure that all the neighbours get water.

The examples in the neighbourhoods of Maldonado, and the different situations in the beach zones, illustrate the necessity of incorporating the vision and the needs of the sectors most directly and urgently affected by water management changes before planning privatisations of this type. When water management policies are being discussed, decision makers must address the issue of ensuring equitable access to water as well as what constitutes a sustainable use of this resource.