

Community aqueducts in Colombia: **advances, challenges and perspectives for social transformation in rural areas ***

Acueductos comunitarios en Colombia: avances, desafíos y perspectivas para la transformación social en áreas rurales

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Abstract

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The article discusses the significance of community aqueducts as territorial collective actions affecting water management and the defense of the right of access to water at the community level. From a rural sociology perspective, it strives to highlight the role and function of community aqueducts as collective initiatives at the territorial level, that promote social transformation in rural areas.

The paper presents an approach to the definition of community aqueducts. A brief contextualization in Colombia is developed and the analysis of the relationship as a collective action that promotes territorial social mobilization is explained. Finally, the paper also highlights the challenges faced by community aqueducts and their contribution to managing water resources and constructing the social network around water. This reflection is based on a qualitative approach and the review and analysis of documents and systematization of experiences with community aqueducts in the departments of Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Norte de Santander, Nariño and La Guajira in Colombia.

Keywords:

Community water management, community aqueducts, collective action, right to water.

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Resumen

El artículo discute la importancia de los acueductos comunitarios como acciones colectivas territoriales que inciden en la gestión del agua y la defensa del derecho de acceso al agua a nivel comunitario. Desde una perspectiva de la sociología rural, se busca resaltar el papel y función de los acueductos comunitarios como iniciativas colectivas a nivel territorial, que promueven la transformación social en zonas rurales.

El artículo presenta una aproximación a la definición de los acueductos comunitarios. Se desarrolla una breve contextualización en Colombia y se explica el análisis de la relación como acción colectiva que promueve la movilización social territorial. Finalmente, el documento también destaca los desafíos que enfrentan los acueductos comunitarios y su contribución a la gestión de los recursos hídricos y la construcción de la red social en torno al agua. Esta reflexión se basa en un enfoque cualitativo y en la revisión y análisis de documentos y sistematización de experiencias con acueductos comunitarios en los departamentos del Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Norte de Santander, Nariño y La Guajira en Colombia.

Palabras clave:

Gestión comunitaria del agua, acueductos comunitarios, acción colectiva, derecho al Agua.

Introduction

Community aqueducts have become popular initiatives in Colombia due to the need for access to water resources. This analysis aims to demonstrate the significant role played by these community aqueducts as territorial collective actions that aid in social transformation in rural areas. Additionally, it acknowledges the importance of their contribution to guaranteeing the individual and collective right to water. Accordingly, the article presents a definition of community aqueducts, followed by a general diagnosis in Colombia. A reflection on collective action, mobilization, and social transformation in rural areas ensues. Finally, since popular action, the main advances and challenges for consolidating community aqueducts as water service providers.

What are community aqueducts?

Community aqueducts are organizations that form from neighborhood connections and proximity in a specific territorial zone, both in rural and urban areas. The primary reason for their formation is the necessity for water access, given the State abandonment of its responsibility to ensure ideal living conditions for the people. However, as Correa (2006) suggests, this process takes on multiple dimensions and becomes associative:

Community aqueducts are complex entities in the historical, social, economic and public institutional sense, since they are above all popular constructions around water management that are part of the social territories in villages, indigenous reservations, black communities, territories and neighborhoods in the different regions and cities of the country. As such, they are diverse popular institutions that are part of the national public patrimony because of their socio-cultural and territorial condition, and because of their public purpose, water as a common good and fundamental right. (p.11)

Community aqueducts serve as references for defending popular culture and natural resources, creating close relationships with the territory, ecosystems, and water sources. Consequently, in rural areas, these organizations have a stronger link to the environment, watersheds, forests, and other resources. From a sociological standpoint, it can be concluded that rural community aqueducts promote social transformation and development. The above is manifested in rural economies targeting sustainability while alleviating poverty and fostering cooperation between public and private sectors.

Community aqueducts also contribute to environmental governance processes. According to Molina (2014, p.30), environmental governance is defined as the "[...] processes of decision making and exercise of authority in the field of public goods, in which government institutions, private companies and civil society interact". Thus, the relationship between different actors and social networks in water management at the rural level is indispensable. Consequently, it is necessary to formulate and implement public policies that correspond to these social networks between communities and state institutions.

Environmental governance also recognizes the concern of people in relation to mitigating the impact of environmental damage. According to Molina-Orjuela (2014, p 225), there are three dimensions that environmental governance addresses: personal, political and economic. Therefore, it involves

a look that links the local and the global. However, the local perspective prevails, as the defense of water creates a connection with nature.

An important aspect to consider is the significant amount of legitimacy granted to these organizations at the local level, which is somewhat lessened when examined at the regional and national levels. This is because these organizations are the result of community members coming together around water-related issues. It is widely accepted that these groups have a significant amount of authority within their immediate areas. Therefore, recognizing the subjective processes and meanings generated by water as a natural resource that unites and creates social bonds in communities is crucial, creating new forms of associativity. According to Quintana (2016, p.348), from Bourdieu's perspective, water management is understood as a field of power. Thus, it is a field in which different actors interact and have relationships framed in a historical context, objectified and with different positions according to their roles and forms of capital. In this particular case, under the logic of the State as guarantor of access and distribution of water.

Therefore, the defense of water contributes to the social and cultural construction of the territories. Consequently, the processes of popular mobilization that emerge from community aqueducts reflect the relationship with territorial processes. The territorial defined as:

[...] the lived space, modeled by man, according to his needs. The territory comes to be considered as a social product, a social construction. With symbolic elements that are created by men but that, at the same time, have the capacity to produce identity. (Capel, 2017, p.11)

In this regard, it is possible to understand the value and contribution of the symbolic that community aqueducts represent in the dynamics of the territory. Their relationship is not only with social actors, but also with political, economic and cultural actors that configure new subjectivities around water. Without leaving aside the link with nature in the construction of landscapes around water in rural environments.

Colombian context

According to population projections from the DANE (National Administrative Department of Statistics), by 2022 only 23.7% of Colombia's population lives in rural areas, or 12.22 million people (p. 2). The Superintendence of Public Utilities has identified around 12,000 organizations throughout the country involved in community aqueducts (Cadauid, 2009, p.58). These entities play a vital role in managing community water and demonstrate the significant number of territories lacking access to this resource. According to the Ministry of Housing, City and Territory, rural areas have a service coverage of 71.54% (cited in Moreno, 2020, p.33).

The Political Constitution of Colombia and Law 142 of 1994 permit legally recognized organizations to provide domiciliary public utilities. Nonetheless, a discrepancy exists between regulatory and practical applications, as the law fails to specify the recognition of community aqueducts. Consequently, the coordination between aqueducts serves to sway the formulation of public policy that acknowledges the unique characteristics of these aqueducts.

The socio-economic vulnerability of rural territories requires careful consideration, as exemplified by Perry's (2010) findings that 62.1% of rural residents live in poverty, and 21.5% in extreme poverty. This vulnerability is linked to violence and armed conflict, as without adequate living conditions, there is a greater likelihood of increased criminal activity resulting from a lack of opportunities.

Collective action, mobilization and social transformation

Community aqueducts are considered a collective action as described by Smelser (1989):

Collective action is a reactive behavioral response to crises and social transformations, and not as Parsons said, to norms and values. Collective actions arise to confront the undefined or unstructured, that is, in the face of failures in the integration of the system. (Cited by Jiménez, 2007, p.5)

Based on the given information, it is evident that communities are creating community aqueducts as a response to the crisis of limited access to water resources, due to their growing social responsibility. In Colombia, these organizations have developed various strategies at the trade union level to increase their capacity and form connections to consolidate their work as small lenders.

Consequently, the connection between collective action and social mobilization becomes apparent. Specifically, the establishment of networks focused on defending community water management initiates processes that aim to impact public policy. For example, there are situations, such as the proposal of a bill that ensures the right to community water management, which highlight this relationship. The aim is to establish the aqueducts as key players in safeguarding the right to water as a public resource and fundamental entitlement.

On the other hand, the creation of organizations such as community aqueducts in rural areas presents opportunities for social transformation. This is due to several factors: firstly, there is a direct connection with the natural resources in the territories. Secondly, the legitimacy of entities that manage the resource in a communal way. Thirdly, they are collective territorial actors who pursue a single general objective above individual interest. Finally, they reflect intersubjective relationships around the meaning of water that constitute a social network in the territories.

Regarding the role of rural women in community water management, Correa (2006, p.14) argues that rural women play a prominent role in managing community water. This role is attributed to cultural and social norms that associate the responsibilities of care and water management with women's traditional roles as housewives and caregivers. Consequently, it is evident that women make a significant contribution to social change since they have spearheaded alliances and community initiatives. Nevertheless,

gender stereotypes regarding work assignments persist, exemplified by the maintenance of aqueduct systems and infrastructure being typically assigned to men.

At a general level, Quintana (2016) cited by Torres and Sanchez (2021), highlights the consolidation of community aqueducts as participatory settings that empower individuals to improve water management through the production of instances of articulation. Furthermore, these aqueducts are acknowledged by both community and institutional actors at the local level. It is the responsibility of actors in various territories to organize meetings to facilitate ongoing exchange and sectoral dialogue processes.

Challenges for the consolidation of community aqueducts in rural areas

Despite the progress achieved, there are still challenges hindering the consolidation of community water management in Colombia. One of the main hurdles is the inadequate coordination among local, regional, and national levels of the sector administration. This issue impacts the development of public policy from a territorial perspective. For territorial development, it is challenging to strengthen the collective territorial actor because inconsistencies arise from specific interests that surpass general interests.

It is essential to overcome the vision of water as a public resource managed for private interests and profit. In this way, the different actors involved in the collective management of water will be able to overcome barriers at the community and institutional levels. As a territorial process, the main challenge is the consolidation of community scenarios that promote common benefit and universal access in an unequal context such as the Colombian case.

Community aqueducts face a dilemma in reconciling technical demands with the reality of community management. This results from an absence of formalization within these organizations. As a result, public policy must be

designed based on local realities to facilitate social transformation. Contrary to current trends, which prioritize neoliberal market logic and institutionalism over the daily organizational practices within these aqueducts.

Another major challenge is the ongoing armed conflict in Colombia, particularly in the rural areas, where criminal activity is concentrated. As a result, the rural landscape is in a constant state of crisis and transformation due to the conflict's dynamics, which generate displacement processes, an increase in criminal activities, drug trafficking, fighting and confrontations, among others. This impacts the rise in poverty rates and the social and economic susceptibility of the population.

Conclusions

Finally, the multidimensionality of community aqueducts can be acknowledged, as they extend beyond more infrastructure and encompass the social processes of neighborhoods, communities, and intersubjective relationships involving water. Therefore, sociological analysis of community aqueducts is warranted, considering their relationship to water management and social transformation in rural areas.

Collective water management has an impact on territorial development based on the social networks it establishes between institutions, community organizations, and the private sector. Water as a resource should be conceived as a common element that produces elements of identity, community, and improvement of the quality of life. In this sense, as a field of power, water management is a point of interest from sociology to understand the processes of social transformation in rural areas.

The Colombian situation is complex due to the vulnerabilities faced by the rural population, as well as economic, social, political, and environmental issues in the context of an armed conflict. As a result of these factors, identifying social transformation processes becomes increasingly difficult due to the State and its institutions lack attention.

Community water management contributes to social mobilization by meeting a collective need and bringing together diverse actors with a shared objective. Consequently, it becomes a shared effort that can evolve into a social movement in defense of water. In this sense, it is possible to establish that social movements around natural resources have great potential to transform realities. In addition, they are related to global movements that scale globally in the defense of the environment and mitigation of the effects of climate change.

Despite recognizing community aqueducts as organizations that contribute to social transformation, there are numerous territorial challenges, ranging from the local to national level. Regulations and economics are key factors in consolidating and recognizing these entities as allies in water management, which contributes to the defense of water as both an individual and collective right. Thus, from the aqueducts perspective, there is still a need to continue strengthening and consolidating the different actors involved to influence public policy.

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