

Learning Case



Citizen Participation for the Human Right to Water Municipality of Suchitoto, El Salvador

1. Learning Objectives

This learning case is aimed at guiding the reader in:

- How methods for citizens empowerment enables policy change and inclusion in decision-making at the local level.
- How participatory decision-making can strengthen the right to water at the local level.
- How to apply lessons learned on different methods for stakeholder engagement in water management.



2. Case Description

The case plays out in 2019, when there is still no adopted national general law on the protection of water. The lack of a general law has entailed that the prioritization of human's access to safe drinking water is overruled by other priorities such as intensive agriculture or industrial needs¹. This has led to El Salvador being one of the most water-stressed countries in Central America². Only two years later the El Salvadorian government will pass The General Water Law³, which is a project driven by the government. However, it is also criticised by regional communities, environmental groups as well as the

¹ <https://www.wearewater.org/en/insights/el-salvador-the-never-ending-struggle-for-water/>

² <https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/f94829da-5ba1-46e2-b6fc-c8d9deae57b6/content#page=65>

³ <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/sites/default/files/documents/correspondencia/D1FE560D-0A54-44F1-9CC9-EC0151C221C1.pdf>

UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation for not including the principle of citizen participation in the effective control of water policies⁴ and for having contradictory prioritized between humans right to water and the privatization of water⁵. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have also addressed that the government of El Salvador should recognize the human rights to drinking water and sanitation, and they state that the General Water Resource Law has achieved partial compliance⁶.



Ana Maria wakes up on a warm morning in her rural community in El Salvador, ready to prepare for her day at the municipal office in the city of Suchitoto. The municipality, situated in the mid-north of the country, is predominantly rural. As she begins her day, Ana Maria prepares breakfast and lunch for her husband and children, as well as food for the animals. Knowing she'll be away all day, she ensures all the household care work is completed before heading to the office.

While filling the water bowls, she notices the water is not running—a sign of a shortage that could last for days. Carrying the largest water bowl, she heads to the communal water tap to fill it. Although the water is undrinkable, it will suffice for essential household needs during her absence. She then catches the local bus that winds through the dense forest, transporting her to the cobblestone streets of Suchitoto.

Arriving at the edge of the old town, an oasis nestled in lush greenery along the shores of Lago Suchitlán, the country's largest lake, Ana Maria steps off the bus. Walking through the streets, flanked by colonial-era houses painted in vibrant colors, she reflects on the rich cultural heritage preserved in Suchitoto. The municipality, with a population of 24,800 according to the latest census, is home to 17,000 people living in rural areas.

As Ana Maria walks the cobblestone streets, the morning's water shortage weighs on her mind. She worries whether the water she fetched will suffice for her husband and child throughout the day. Despite being one of the municipalities with the greatest water availability, thanks to deep wells supplying many of its systems, access to water in Suchitoto remains a persistent challenge. The issue has long been a

⁴ <https://arpas.org.sv/2021/06/propuesta-gubernamental-de-ley-de-agua-tienen-vacios-y-contradicciones-dicen-organizaciones/>

⁵ <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Estamos-ante-un-reto-democratico-no-ante-una-ocasion-de-negocio-dice-relator-de-la-ONU-sobre-ley-de-aguas-20211105-0035.html>

⁶ https://scm.oas.org/PDFS/2023/CIDH/IA2022_Cap_5_El_Salvador_EN.pdf

source of conflict among various stakeholders, each bringing differing perspectives on water access and management to the table.

The rural areas of Suchitoto face persistent challenges in accessing fresh water, a concern that weighs heavily on Ana Maria's mind. However, she also reflects on the strong participation of civil society and the community-based water authorities that manage water systems in these rural areas. According to the



Salvadoran Water Authority, these authorities are “non-profit social organizations with legal status, dedicated to providing drinking water services in urban or rural communities.” In Suchitoto, 32 community water systems operate under boards of directors whose representatives are democratically elected by their respective communities. These systems currently achieve a water coverage rate of 85% in rural areas, demonstrating the importance of self-governance in certain aspects of water management, such as pricing and citizen participation in service delivery.

Despite these efforts, the government and national authorities retain the ultimate responsibility for ensuring water availability, quality, and safety. Community water authorities rely on larger-scale infrastructure and policy support to deliver uncontaminated, drinkable water consistently to the population.

As Ana Maria arrives at her office, her thoughts remain fixed on the broader water crisis affecting her community and the country. El Salvador has the lowest water availability per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the human right to drinking water and sanitation is far from being realized. Only 32% of rural residents have access to potable water, and nearly 40% of water supply systems, alongside 95% of rivers, are heavily polluted, severely impacting public health. Beyond physical water scarcity, the country also struggles with economic water scarcity, where insufficient investment in infrastructure hinders effective water delivery and usage.

In Suchitoto, decades of poor governance, industrial overexploitation, and pollution have left much of the rural population without adequate water access. Recognizing these challenges, the municipal board has committed to addressing the lack of regulatory measures and ensuring the human right to water for its citizens. The board has also pledged to collaborate with various stakeholders to strengthen coordinated action.

Later in the day, Ana Maria attends a meeting with civil society organizations working on water management. These groups, united under the “Movement of United Organizations for Water,” include representatives from the municipality's 32 community water authorities. The meeting provides a platform for these stakeholders to discuss collective strategies and coordinate efforts to secure sustainable and equitable access to water for all.

3. Discussion

Discussion questions

Imagine you are Ana Maria, tasked with strengthening the human right to water in Suchitoto through a citizen participation method. You are required to design a process and present it at the meeting with civil society organizations and community water authorities.

Defining the Right to Water:

- What does the human right to water mean in practical terms for the municipality of Suchitoto?
- How would you address both physical and economic water scarcity to ensure access for all citizens?
- How can the principle of non-discrimination be applied in water governance to ensure equality across rural and urban areas?

Designing Decision-Making Processes:

- What kind of participatory decision-making process would you implement to ensure transparency and accountability in water governance?
- How would you structure regular consultations between community water authorities, civil society, and local government?
- How can monitoring and evaluation systems be incorporated to assess the impact of decisions on the right to water?

Engaging Stakeholders:

- Who are the key stakeholders (e.g., government authorities, community leaders, NGOs, private sector actors) that should be involved in strengthening the right to water?
- How would you engage civil society organizations, like the “Movement of United Organizations for Water,” to create synergies in advocacy and implementation?
- What role could regional or international partnerships play in enhancing local water management systems?

Ensuring Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups:

- How would you identify and prioritize the needs of marginalized or vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and rural populations, in water governance?
- What specific actions would you take to ensure the participation of women, especially considering their role in water collection and household care work?
- How can local democratic practices, like electing community water board members, be strengthened to enhance the voice of underrepresented groups?

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



4. Real Case Ending

On May 28, 2017, the municipality of Suchitoto in El Salvador took a historic step toward recognizing water as a human right. Local organizations and citizens organized a popular referendum to prioritize water as a public good and ensure its sustainable use for present and future generations. The referendum aimed to regulate activities affecting water management, guarantee equitable distribution, and ensure that access to clean water would remain a fundamental right for the population. Supported by local, national, and international organizations, the referendum process was monitored in ten voting centers across the municipality.

The referendum question asked citizens if Suchitoto should declare water a human right, requiring 40% of registered voters to participate for the results to be legally binding. Of the 3,564 votes cast, 96% supported the motion. However, voter turnout reached only 37%, just below the 40% threshold, rendering the referendum non-binding despite its overwhelming support. This outcome underscored both the community's commitment to water sustainability and the challenges of mobilizing sufficient civic participation.

In reflecting on the referendum, Morena Herrera, Director of the Feminist Collective of Suchitoto, emphasized the significance of the effort: "We've shown an historic defiance this day and we need to recognize that." The process highlighted the potential of citizen participation in decision-making and demonstrated the municipality's determination to address water scarcity, a critical issue in El Salvador.

The referendum unfolded against the backdrop of a national water crisis, with El Salvador experiencing five consecutive years of drought. Efforts to pass a General Law of Water in the Salvadoran Parliament remained stalled, with competing proposals from government and social organizations. Despite this legislative gridlock, Suchitoto's mayor, Pedrina Rivera, affirmed the municipality's commitment to advocating for the approval of a comprehensive water law. This case exemplifies the ongoing struggle to secure water as a human right in a context of environmental and political challenges, demonstrating the resilience and determination of the people of Suchitoto.

Follow-Up Discussion

- The referendum in Suchitoto received overwhelming support but failed to meet the required voter turnout to be legally binding. What strategies could have been implemented to increase voter participation and ensure the referendum's success?
- Although the referendum was not binding, it demonstrated a strong example of citizen engagement. What other mechanisms of citizen participation could Suchitoto use to continue advocating for the human right to water?
- The national General Law of Water has been stalled in the Salvadoran Parliament for years. How can local governments, like Suchitoto, influence national policy changes or collaborate with social organizations to accelerate legislative action?
- In the context of Suchitoto's water crisis, how should local actions (e.g., community water management) be balanced with national-level initiatives to address systemic issues such as drought, overexploitation, and pollution?
- Suchitoto's referendum showcased innovative approaches to participatory democracy. How could the lessons from Suchitoto be adapted and applied in other municipalities facing similar water governance challenges?