



COFFEE BREAK: Unincorporated and economically disadvantaged communities along the US-MX border

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Brief Summary

SPEAKERS

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The Forum convened to discuss unincorporated and economically disadvantaged communities along the US-MX border from the perspective of water and sanitation.

What are the global problems related to this topic?

This problem is broader than just between Mexico and the US; the problem is a combined one of both water and sanitation access globally, affecting billions of people. Additionally, there is the lack of water governance. Communities need good governance to attract financing to improve water quality. The cost of ongoing operation and maintenance may exceed initial capital costs over the life of a system.

Relationship of drinking water and the Border region

Reliance on private wells for water is ubiquitous across the country, not just in the border region. 41% of the US population obtains water from private wells and in Texas it is 55%. Private wells are not subject to EPA regulations. More than 9% of wells have unsafe levels of contaminants; resources and knowledge to fix the problem are lacking. Many communities do not even have the capacity to test their drinking water quality. Quality here means meeting the EPA standards and expectations.

What has been the government perspective?

The main lesson learned is that poor water quality manifests in the community as a higher level of communicable diseases. It is a tough choice for a municipality to extend service to unincorporated areas and it is not correct to assume that, if we have money available to correct a problem, the problem will be fixed. It is also not correct to assume that providing a community with adequate water and wastewater treatment will enable it to grow and, thus, to charge rates to operate and maintain the system. The Economically Distressed Areas Program (EDAP) is a generational opportunity and has been oversubscribed in Texas. But many communities do not have the institutional knowledge and capacity to compete for these funds. Just knowing how to get there in the pre-development phase is a huge obstacle for some communities.

What is the perspective from the Mexico side?

There is now a constitutional mandate that everyone have access to clean water and sanitation. But Mexico has a long history of having regulations with nothing on the ground to show for it. The marginal communities are very isolated in Mexico and lack human and financial resources to handle this on their own; technologies are frequently ill-chosen, especially for sanitation; resources are not well-funded; water is not part of the plan for urban development in Mexico. Even when there are sufficient funds there is insufficient attention given to the underlying social structures and capacity.

Would it make sense to have an organization that assists marginalized communities with the financial/technical/managerial (FTM) aspects of water and sanitation development?

Organizations like Global Wash enable communities to scale their projects to do exactly this. It begins with a needs assessment to figure out what are the water demands, community-specific solutions, appropriate technology. But it is difficult to find funding for this effort because funding agencies want to dive right into the infrastructure component and not the planning phase that can last more than a year.

It is not just money but governance, accountability, and leadership and not just in Mexico. For example, Jackson Mississippi, a city of 160,000, has a failing water and sanitation system close to “2nd World” condition. At some point there will have to be “tough love” to hold these systems and their leadership accountable to assure that they can be sustained long term.

How do these marginal communities end up dealing with private wells?

Many wells are very old and in poor condition. For future wells, the cost is proportional to the depth of the well and shallow wells are more susceptible to contamination. Cooperative wells in the colonias along the border are typically too shallow. There is also the issue of testing water quality in these types of wells and the barriers for colonias’ residents.

Is there a way to use natural methods of water treatment?

Yes, there is but regulatory agencies may not see it that way for now, preferring more traditional solutions. They need to adapt a view that natural methods can be a bridge to a better future.

Regional versus de-centralized water systems?

In Texas, regionalization is the mandated legislated preference for the Texas Water Code. This can fail at the local level where people feel that they are going to lose control to, e.g., their neighboring community. Also, regulatory agencies can fail to push for regionalization despite statutory requirements.

There is a kind of paradox here in that regional solutions are preferable but support for this needs to come from the bottom up. The long-term solution for this is education and capacity building in the planning stage for these types of communities. Also, increased capacity in water quality monitoring. The USDA has funds for colonias' water and sanitation but has been limited in its ability to disperse these funds because of the lack of governance in such communities.

What is the role of transparency of information?

Authorities may not want to share information and Mexico is less open in this regard than the US. On the Mexican side, officials are on the spot if their system is not in compliance. Hence, there is not a good inventory of these communities and the status of their water and sanitation. The 2020 census in Mexico exposed this situation for households when consumers were asked directly about the state of their water and sanitation.

In the US there is mandatory reporting by utilities for water quality. The fallacy is to think by having this transparency everyone is covered. When we are talking about marginalized communities, they are not on anyone's radar and fall through the cracks.

Final thoughts?

There must be a focus on capacity building in this segment for planning and long-term operation and maintenance. How are we going to maintain what we build 20 years out from now? Does it make sense to have a tariff structure? These discussions must happen early in the project and include the community that is involved.

Trust is a component of this, and these communities have to trust those who are reaching out to help them. We must find the champions in these communities who will lead in solving their own problems. We need to make these marginalized communities visible to the policy apparatus and at their own level, not aggregated into larger urban planning.

We keep growing and enough water will never be enough. Key values are participation, inclusion, transparency, enforcement, natural methods, trust, knowledge, honesty. This Forum is a place of trust and sharing information. There needs to be a change in the way we think about water and water issues. This is a lot more to it than money and infrastructure alone.