



# AGENDA FOR CHANGE

Strengthening water, sanitation, and hygiene systems together.

## STRENGTHENING WASH SYSTEMS IN GUATEMALA: AN INTERVIEW WITH HELVETAS' DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS

*Background: HELVETAS has been working in Guatemala since 1972 across three focus areas: water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), agricultural value chains, and women's empowerment. Since 2013, they have introduced work approaches for systemic change into the delivery of WASH services in the Western Highlands region focusing on more equitable water management and more direct participation and influence of the end-users over local WASH governance. Below is the full interview with the HELVETAS Guatemala Program Director.*



*The Municipal Council of San Miguel Ixtahuacán receiving a printed copy of the urban water regulations. (European Union/HELVETAS Guatemala)*

**Alec Shannon (AS), Content Strategist, Agenda for Change: When and why did HELVETAS Guatemala move from a project approach to a wash systems approach?**

**Jan van Montfort (JVM), Director of Programs, HELVETAS Guatemala:** Before 2013, we were very much an implementing agency. We would go and construct water systems in a limited number of communities. These communities were happy with us, but of course this model was not scalable, and the impact was limited. Also, it created a parallel system and sort of legitimized that the government avoided taking its full responsibility to ensure the constitutional human right to water for all Guatemalan citizens. We eventually concluded it is, and should be, a core government task to invest in water systems and secure the provision of basic WASH services, and not necessarily a task for a foreign NGO. Therefore, we changed our approach because we felt that we were fulfilling a task that we should not be. Also we felt that more systemic change was required, and that we should concentrate on strengthening those local organizations that could bring these system changes about: managing their water and sanitation systems, and exercising civil pressure for the government to improve its WASH governance and to invest in basic WASH service delivery for all, in an inclusive manner and with integrity.

**AS: What parts of the WASH system are you working to strengthen?**

**JVM:** First, we started helping communities to create governance structures at the community level to take care of the water system, administering it and preserving it by doing regular maintenance, through both training and capacity building. And in doing so, we felt that communities should be able to request that government takes on the responsibility for structural repairs, required upgrades, or extensions to their water systems, which they cannot afford. We did some advocacy training around



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this for community members so that they would critically follow what the government is doing and try to put their own needs more clearly on the agenda, using the participation spaces that have been created.

## **AS: Tell me more about your process?**

JVM: One of the key elements of what we were doing was helping these communities to form bylaws. To start, we hired consultants and the consultants wrote these bylaws, but it was not very effective, and no one took it very seriously. So, we started developing them ourselves in a participatory way, working directly with the water users and empowering them to formulate and internally negotiate their own rules and regulations. This took much more time but produced water bylaws that the communities really own and enforce.

During this process, the water fees were one of the main topics, and we started calculating with the communities what reasonable fees would be, taking into consideration what is involved in operating, administering and maintaining the system. After the bylaws were agreed on, people started paying their water fees, and there was much more transparency and accountability. The fees collected were used to maintain the water systems and buy water purification devices, and in some cases, the community members managed to mobilize funds from remittances and savings and buy the water source.

We also started building the capacity of the municipal WASH services and municipal associations (“mancomunidades”) to empower communities to enforce their WASH bylaws. We now see that the methodology is fully owned and replicated in 13 municipalities, and that the mayors of these municipalities are seeing the benefit. In addition, we empowered communities to influence the municipal WASH policies and budgets, by demanding transparency, participation, and accountability.

## **AS: So, the communities oversee their own WASH systems, and not the government, is that correct?**

JVM: Yes. According to the Municipal Code, the municipality must take charge of the water and sanitation services. In the municipal towns this involves operating, administering, and maintaining the water systems. In the rural communities this involves creating an enabling environment for the community to manage their own systems. When rural people pay the water fees, they pay it to the community structure, and that money stays within the community, and is used to operate and maintain the system.

Furthermore, HELVETAS developed a model called OMAS (“municipal WASH office”), which works to strengthen the WASH system at the municipal level through training and capacity building. It's become a well-accepted model by now; in fact, CARE<sup>1</sup> and several other international NGOs have taken on the OMAS model and [helped to scale it nationwide](#). It is recognized by the government and the association of municipalities. The OMAS model is based on the core WASH functions of the municipality and it forces the municipalities to invest in service provision rather than in infrastructure, and to assume responsibility for the provision of WASH services in their towns and rural areas. We have been helping a lot of municipalities to improve their WASH governance, developing their plans and budgets in a participatory way, making them transparent and rendering accounts on their implementation. Also, we helped them to map out the sources of corruption and develop plans to improve the integrity of the actors involved.

## **AS: What would help you the most to strengthen the system at this point?**

JVM: We have found that the water fees have not by far been enough if a water system needs major repairs; and the fact is that most system do need structural repairs. Most have very high leakage and distribution and storage works that have outlived their economic lifespan. Further most are structurally lacking protection of the water source and water quality management. This is something

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<sup>1</sup> CARE is an Agenda for Change member.



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we are working on now with CARE, Water For People<sup>2</sup>, and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration – to formulate a proposal to facilitate that rural communities can access to credit so they can take out loans to repair the infrastructure, and pay these back from their fees.

Furthermore, we have seen that many municipal authorities and politicians still very much favor investments in infrastructure and engage in corrupt practices when giving out contracts. This leads to a drain of resources and community frustration. Therefore, we have started to train independent journalists and community leaders in good governance practices, to detect, report and denounce cases of corruption in the WASH sector.

## **AS: What tools have you found useful in your work on systems strengthening?**

JVM: The [Framework for Integrity and Governance](#) has been extremely useful for us as a way of approaching the water sector, and we use the concepts of accountability, participation and transparency in all our trainings.

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*Jan van Montfort is Director of Programs for HELVETAS Guatemala. He has been active in development cooperation for 30 years as a capacity builder, organization adviser, programme director, and strategic consultant in 28 different countries. He holds both an MSc in civil engineering and an MBA in strategic business management. He has taken on the assignment of directing the programme of Helvetas in Guatemala, out of interest in the team, projects, and partners, and is dedicated to ensuring that program interventions are innovative and contribute to systemic change.*

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<sup>2</sup> Water For People is also a member.