ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND PERFORMANCE IN URBAN WATER SUPPLY: 
THE CASE OF THE SAGUAPAC CO-OPERATIVE IN SANTA CRUZ, BOLIVIA

Andrew Nickson

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation throughout the developing world has substantially increased the demand for urban water supply (UWS) and in most countries the supply of services has not kept pace with this increasing demand. In many cities a significant percentage of the population still does not have access to piped water. Even where water supply is available, systems have often been severely degraded due to chronic under investment and inadequate maintenance, resulting in excessive water loss through leakage, poor water quality and unreliable flow. In turn, this has contributed to serious disease and public health problems, especially in slums and squatter settlements. Governments in these countries face the difficult challenge of finding enormous investment funds in order to improve UWS. As a result, UWS systems in many low-income countries are facing acute crisis.

One of the most crucial constraints on improving utility performance in UWS has been institutional. Until recently such utilities in most countries have been operated by the public sector. Yet most utilities do not have the power to set tariffs. Because the sector has been financially supported through central government grants, government-set tariffs have not had to reflect the full cost of service provision, resulting in significantly subsided tariffs. Given this history of subsidisation, governments have been reluctant to raise tariffs to meet cost recovery criteria in order to cover operation and maintenance costs, as well as debt service obligations for capital investment.

Until the mid-1980s, UWS was the public service in which private sector participation (PSP) was least prevalent. Yet from then onwards there has been a marked increase in PSP in an effort to reap the gains in performance that have eluded state-owned water utilities. A variety of different forms of interaction between the public and private sectors has evolved in response to the cultural, economic, legal and financial structure of each country. A recent survey identified eight such organisational arrangements: corporatisation, the service contract, the management contract, the lease (affermage) contract, the concession contract, the co-operative arrangement, the build-operate transfer arrangement, and divestiture (Nickson:170-176). Of these, lease and concession contracts promoted by French global water corporations represent the most common trend for PSP in UWS today (Triche:9). They are being introduced in major cities such as Buenos Aires and Mexico City in Latin America, Abidjan and Accra in Africa, and Manila and Djakarta in Asia. This paper examines the organisational arrangement - the co-operative - that has been least promoted. It does so by studying the only co-operative utility in the world supplying water to a major city - the Cooperativa de Servicios Públicos 'Santa Cruz' Ltda (SAGUAPAC) which provides an uninterrupted 24 hours a day supply of clean water to the 1,00,000 inhabitants of Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

Historical background

Santa Cruz lies in the far east of Bolivia on the edge of the tropical lowlands that stretch to Brazil. It is distant from the highland capital city of La Paz and throughout the first century
after Independence it grew slowly and in isolation from the rest of the country. This neglect by central government engendered a strong sense of regional identity and self-reliance, together with fervent advocacy of decentralisation and regional autonomy. In 1935 President Hernán Busch passed a law that assigned 11% of the royalties from a recently-established petroleum industry in the region to the Departmental authorities. However the law was not implemented and the Department of Santa Cruz continued to languish in neglect. The first hospital was not built until 1951 and the Maternidad Eva Perón was a donation from the Argentine government, following a visit to Santa Cruz by Eva Perón.

In the face of central government intransigence, a civic movement was formed in 1951 to lobby for implementation of the provisions of the 1935 law. Led by a medical doctor, Melchor Pinto, the Movimiento Cívico soon widened its remit to demands for the provision of basic services for the town, which was beginning to experience a population boom associated with its growing economic importance.\[^2\] The movement gained in strength from the growing importance of Santa Cruz in the life of the country. Oil and gas production was expanding rapidly and, following a social revolution in 1952, Santa Cruz became the centre of a government sponsored colonization programme that aimed to develop the virgin lowlands by encouraging migration of peasant farmers from the Andean highlands. The population trebled in a decade from 42,000 in 1950 to 150,000 in 1960, in which year the civic movement finally succeeded in getting the central government to pay petroleum royalties for the first time.

The royalties were initially paid to an ad-hoc Public Works Committee, Comité de Obras Públicas, which used the proceeds for street paving and street lighting. From 1972 royalties were paid to the new Regional Development Corporation of Santa Cruz, CORDECRUZ, which was created by the military government of the time as part of a national programme of administrative deconcentration. In considering the most appropriate organisational arrangement for the new public services, the civic movement opposed state ownership, precisely because of the prevailing neglect by central government. Nor was municipal ownership an appealing alternative, given the extremely weak state of local government in the country. From 1878-1942 and again from 1949-1987 no local government elections took place, municipal councils were abolished and mayors were appointed by central government (Nickson:108). The private sector alternative was equally unattractive, because of the embryonic nature of entrepreneurial development in Santa Cruz. Instead the movement opted for a co-operative model of public service provision. Two factors influenced this decision. First, visiting consultants from Colombia and Blue Ridge, North Carolina who were sponsored by USAID strongly advocated the co-operative model. Second, under the influence of progressive Catholic clergy, a tradition of small-scale co-operative banking was already a well established in Santa Cruz.

The decision to opt for the co-operative model was facilitated by the existence of a national co-operative law, Ley de Cooperativas, that had been promulgated in 1959. The first co-operative, Cooperativa de Teléfonos Automáticos de Santa Cruz (COTAS), was established in 1962 for the telecommunications sector and the second, Cooperativas Rurales de Electricidad (CRE), was set up in 1967 for the electricity sector. In the case of water, a publicly owned company was established in 1973 as an autarkic agency of the Municipality of Santa Cruz but in 1978, ownership was transferred to CORDECRUZ. The following year, on 19 June 1979, the assets of the fledgling water company were transferred to the newly-created water co-operative, SAGUAPAC, which has been the main supplier of water to the city ever since.
The organisational structure of SAGUAPAC

The organisational structure of SAGUAPAC is based on a classical co-operative arrangement. Decision-making is decentralised to its 96,000 customers through nine water districts, distritos de agua, into which the municipality is divided (Annex 1). Every two years, a district assembly is held in each water district, with two principal functions. First, it elects one-third of a six member district council, consejo de distrito, for a six year term of office. Second, it elects three delegates to a biennial city-wide general assembly. SAGUAPAC itself organises the election arrangements, through its own District Unit, and the elections themselves are supervised by the state regulatory agency for co-operatives, Instituto Nacional de Cooperativas (INALCO). In order to vote, customers must produce a water bill and identity card.

Each of the nine water districts has between 8 -11,000 members, who are potential voters. But the turnout in the biennial elections to the district water users council is extremely low throughout the city. Voter turnout in the most recent elections that were held over three evenings in June 1998 averaged only 200-300 per district, equivalent to a rate of only 2.5%. Turnout is especially low in those districts which already have universal water and sewerage connexions. Despite its commitment to the co-operative ideal of participation, which is repeated in its annual reports, the management of SAGUAPAC is surprisingly complacent about the lack of citizen involvement in elections and interprets the low turnout as tacit approval of the performance of the co-operative.

The biennial city-wide general assembly, comprising a total of 36 representatives (three delegates per district plus the presidents of the nine district councils), takes place within weeks of the district assemblies. It also has two principal functions. First, it elects three members to the nine member administrative board, Consejo de Administración, of SAGUAPAC for a six year term of office. Second, it elects two members to the six-person Supervisory Board, Comité de Vigilancia, of SAGUAPAC that oversees the work of the administrative board, again for a six-year term of office.

The administrative board meets twice a month, on a Monday evening from 7 - 9.30 pm. It elects a leadership (president, vice-president, treasurer and secretary) who may serve a maximum of three consecutive two-year terms of office. The administrative board appoints the general manager of SAGUAPAC, who retains overall responsibility for personnel appointments within the co-operative. Four managers - responsible respectively for commercial, administration and finance, engineering and planning matters - report directly to the general manager (Annex 2). The main tasks of the administrative board are to approve tariff increases, investment plans and staff salary scales. Until 1997, members of the administrative board received no remuneration. They now receive a nominal attendance allowance of between $300-400 per month to compensate them for the time spent on co-operative business. The supervisory board meet less frequently. Its main task is to appoint the external auditors of SAGUAPAC (currently Price Waterhouse) and to approve or not the auditors’ report.

The performance of SAGUAPAC

The performance of UWS utilities may be measured according to three basic criteria: efficiency, equity and effectiveness. SAGUAPAC performs well on all three counts. The
number of SAGUAPAC employees is very low at only 389 (August 1998) despite the fact that its does not contract out any of its operational and maintenance activities. Only major construction activities are contracted out, and in these cases SAGUAPAC adopts the World Bank good practice guidelines for tendering. In the early 1990s billing was contracted out to the private sector on an experimental basis. However, for two reasons, it was soon decided to return to 'in-house' billing. First, it proved time-consuming to calculate the unit cost of billing that was required in order to evaluate bids from contractors. Second, the cut-off policy applied by the private contractor to customers who did not pay their bills proved too inflexible and threatened SAGUAPAC's public image as a socially responsible utility.

Efficiency

The efficiency of UWS utilities may be measured in two ways - technical efficiency and financial efficiency. The following three indicators are used to measure the technical efficiency - the relationship between resource inputs and outputs - of UWS utilities:

* **Water losses**, expressed in the form of unaccounted for water (UFW). This measures the difference between the volume of water delivered to the distribution system and the water sold, expressed as a percentage of net water production as delivered to the distribution system.

* **Staff productivity**, expressed as the number of staff per thousand water connections.

* **Meter performance**, expressed as the percentage of connections with meters in working order.

The following three indicators are used to measure the financial efficiency - the degree of success of a utility in achieving organisational targets at minimum cost - of UWS utilities:

* **Average tariff**, expressed in US$ per cubic metre.

* **Personnel cost ratio**, which measures the ratio of total staff costs to total operating costs, excluding depreciation, interest payments and debt-service payments.

* **Collection efficiency**, expressed in the form of total annual collections as a percentage of total annual billings.

On the above criteria of technical and financial efficiency, SAGUAPAC performs well in comparison with other Bolivian utilities (Table 1). Its operational efficiency is displayed by a relatively low level of water losses, a high staff productivity and universal metering. Its financial efficiency is displayed by a low average tariff, low personnel cost ratio and high collection efficiency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAGUAPAC</th>
<th>SAMAPA</th>
<th>SEMAPA</th>
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<td>(Santa Cruz)</td>
<td>(La Paz)</td>
<td>(Cochabamba)</td>
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Table 1: Bolivian water utilities: Key indicators of efficiency, 1997
**Technical efficiency**

Unaccounted for water (UFW) 23% 33% 54%

Employees/1000 water connections 4.02 4.43 6.49

Metered connections 100% 98% 64%

**Financial efficiency**

Average water tariff ($/cu.m) 0.55 n/a 0.63

Personnel cost ratio 0.60 0.65 0.49

Collection efficiency 96% 111% 61%

**Effectiveness**

Water coverage 80% 84% 57%

Water availability 24 hours n/a n/a


The efficiency of SAGUAPAC is also evident in its use of foreign loan finance for investment. A recent $35m World Bank loan (1993-97) for rehabilitation and expansion of three Bolivian water utilities (SAGUAPAC, SAMAPA and SEMAPA) provides an opportunity to compare efficiency in this respect. A World Bank appraisal report of loan implementation praised the efficient use of funds by SAGUAPAC, which constructed additional sewerage works using the funds saved in carrying out the original programme, so enabling it to deliver 125% of project targets. By contrast, at the original closing date (June 1996) only SAGUAPAC had completed its works, while SAMAPA and SEMAPA had barely initiated implementation. In La Paz, all of the original work programme was eventually completed after an eighteen month extension of the closing date. But in Cochabamba only 77% of the original work programme had been achieved by this time. As a result, the actual internal rate of return (IRR) of the SAGUAPAC component of the loan exceeded the expected value in sharp contrast to the situation for SAMAPA and SEMAPA.

**Table 2: Internal Rate of Return on components of World Bank loan to Bolivian Water Utilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>SAGUAPAC</th>
<th>SAMAPA</th>
<th>SEMAPA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>20.37</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>0.58</td>
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Equity

The measurement of equity in the sense of comparisons among those households connected to the piped network is beset with conceptual difficulties. So-called 'lifeline' rates may be incorporated within a system of volumetric charging (e.g. a low and subsidised unit cost for the first 25-50 litres per person per day, with higher rates for additional 'blocks' of water) in order to protect the poor, and to maximise social return from the public health external benefits of UWS. The extent to which an 'increasing-block' or graduated tariff structure, which incorporates 'life-line' rates, is used in preference to a pro rata tariff structure is often viewed as an indicator of the degree to which equity considerations are incorporated in the pricing policy of a water utility through cross-subsidisation at the expense of allocative efficiency. Increasing-block tariffs also encourage water conservation and efficient use by increasing charges at higher use.

Although its average tariff ($0.55/cu.m.) is not low by Latin American standards, SAGUAPAC operates a tariff pricing structure that incorporates three forms of progressive cross-subsidisation. First, a low-cost 'lifeline' tariff is applied to the first 15 cubic metres per month consumed by residential users. Second, the tariff structure differentiates between users. Tariffs for commercial and industrial consumers are typically 45% higher than for residential users and a special category of charitable users pays the low 'lifeline' tariff per cubic metre irrespective of the volume consumed. Third, within all user categories except charitable users, there is an 'increasing block' tariff structure. In the case of residential users the unit price per cubic metre for the highest block (136 cu.m. and over) is 250% higher than for the lifeline block (0-15 cu.m.).

The daily wage rate for unskilled work in Santa Cruz in August 1998 was Bs. 25. This was sufficient for such low-income families to purchase 15 cu.m. per month at a cost (Bs.23) equivalent to 4.5% of household income. This is well within the previously considered "affordability limit" of 5 per cent of household income, although the recent application of the contingent valuation method for determining 'willingness to pay' for piped water has revealed that low-income residents are prepared to pay well in excess of this figure (Whittington, D. et al.). Although no rental of meters is permitted, and the cost of meter purchase and installation is relatively high ($100), SAGUAPAC provides low interest credit over two years to finance installation and connection. [9]

Effectiveness

The following two indicators are used to measure effectiveness - the extent to which outputs achieve original objectives - of UWS utilities:

* **Service coverage**, which measures the proportion of the population in the service area that receives water from the public system.

* **Water availability** which is measured by the number of continuous hours per day for which water supply is available from the public system.

On the above criteria, SAGUAPAC performs well in comparison with other Bolivian water utilities. By 1997 the service coverage of SAGUAPAC had reached 80%. A further 10% were connected to the dozen or so smaller co-operatives in the city, bringing the total coverage to
90% of the urban population. This is a considerable achievement in light of the phenomenal growth in population from 42,000 in 1950 to 1,000,000 in 1998 (Table 3). In 1950 Santa Cruz was the fifth largest city in Bolivia, but by the late 1990s it had outstripped La Paz to become the largest city in the country. This dramatic population growth, which reached an annual rate of 10% during the 1980s, has put enormous strain on public services. With an annual growth rate of 6.5%, it is still the fastest growing city in Bolivia, and one of the fastest growing cities in Latin America.

Table 2: Population growth of Santa Cruz

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>42,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
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Sources: Green:3 and SAGUAPAC.

The co-operative structure and performance

In response to the growing water crisis, a new global consensus on managing UWS has emerged in recent years. At its core are two fundamental principles:

* The instrument principle - that water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognised as an economic good. Managing water as an economic good is an important way of achieving efficient and equitable use, and of encouraging conservation and protection of water resources. An important corollary is that water utilities should be treated as commercial enterprises.

* The institutional principle - that water management should be based on a participatory approach involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels, with decision-making taken at the lowest appropriate level according to the concept of subsidiarity

SAGUAPAC embodies both of these principles in its operations. The 'instrument principle' is applied through the application of an 'active charging policy' based on long run marginal cost and the efficient control of costs, while the 'institutional principle' is applied through an organisational structure - the co-operative - that is the essence of subsidiarity

The co-operative structure of SAGUAPAC is a major reason for its high performance. It shields management from undue political interference, especially with regard to personnel matters, tariff-setting, and the awarding of contracts. The co-operative structure also means that SAGUAPAC is not bogged down with legal delays in tendering procedures and the administration of external loan finance that bedevil those water companies belonging to the public sector. It is thus able to implement investment projects much faster and more efficiently than other water utilities.
The co-operative structure encourages a high degree of continuity and probity, both among elected officers and management. The electoral system at all levels (district council, general assembly delegates, administrative board and supervisory board) ensures continuity, both through the relatively long period office in each case (six years) and through the system of election by thirds. [5] This electoral system also militates against corruption via the requirement that members of the district councils, administrative and supervisory boards may not be directly re-elected. They must wait for two years after the end of their six year term of office before standing again for office. The statutes of SAGUAPAC also encourage responsibility of elected officials. Administrative or supervisory board members face suspension if they fail to attend either three consecutive meetings or five meetings in one calendar year.

SAGUAPAC also displays an extraordinary degree of job stability within senior management, in sharp contrast to the situation in water utilities in the rest of Bolivia. The current general manager has held the post without interruption since 1983, and the four departmental managers have each held their posts between 12-14 years. By contrast, in both La Paz and Cochabamba, political intervention by municipal mayors in their capacity as presidents of the boards of directors of the SAMAPA and SEMAPA respectively adversely affected decisions relating to the award of contracts, the timely application of tariffs, bureaucratic delays in carrying out the decisions of the board of directors, and turnover in company managers and personnel.

In sharp contrast with other UWS utilities in Bolivia, SAGUAPAC has an unblemished record with regard to corruption. In both SEMAPA and SAMAPA political interference in project design and implementation led to a substantial reduction in project benefits and a substantial increase in project costs, thereby reducing the overall rate of return (World Bank:///).

The World Bank and SAGUAPAC

The success of SAGUAPAC is well-known in Bolivia. It is a founder member of the Bolivia association of water utilities, Asociación Nacional de Empresas de Agua Potable (ANESAPA), and its general manager is currently president of ANESAPA. Through ANESAPA, SAGUAPAC has provided technical assistance to other Bolivian water utilities for many years. Inspired by the success of SAGUAPAC, urban water supply co-operatives have been established in Tarija (1988) and Trinidad (1991).

The favourable performance of SAGUAPAC is also recognised by the global water industry and the World Bank. Its pre-eminence within Bolivia was recognised by the French water giant, Lyonnaise des Eaux. In a letter to the general manager of SAGUAPAC dated 30 June 1998, its Latin American division chief Jean-Louis Chaussade stated that he "had not the slightest doubt that you have made SAGUAPAC the most competitive water company in Bolivia" (Annex 3). According to the World Bank, the performance indicators of SAGUAPAC also "... rank it as one of the best water and sewerage companies in Latin America" (World Bank: 33).

Yet despite this recognition, the World Bank adopts an ambivalent attitude towards SAGUAPAC. On the one hand, the Bank maintains excellent relations with SAGUAPAC. The utility received a World Bank loan in 1979 for the rehabilitation and expansion of its network, a project that was successfully completed in 1986. From 1990-1997 SAGUAPAC received
$13.3m, part a $35m loan to the Bolivian water sector from the IDA, the soft loan window of the World Bank, which enabled it to extend water production and distribution facilities to 272,000 citizens and to expand sewerage facilities to benefit a population of 46,700.

On the other hand, the Bank has never publicised the SAGUAPAC model as one to replicate in Bolivia itself, nor in the rest of Latin America or elsewhere. The most recent of a long line of Bank publications promoting private sector participation in UWS does not even mention the co-operative option (Haarmeyer & Mody). By contrast, a recent publication by the British government aid agency promoting public-private partnership in UWS singles out SAGUAPAC as a successful example of the co-operative option (DFID:7).

Despite the evident success of SAGUAPAC, the World Bank has not even considered the co-operative as an option for the organisational reform of water utilities in the two other major cities of Bolivia. Instead, as a result of strong pressure from the Bank, in La Paz a municipally-owned utility SAMAPA, was replaced by a 30-year concession contract for water and sewerage services, awarded in June 1997 to Aguas de Illimani, owned by Lyonnaise des Eaux. In Cochabamba, the Bank made intense efforts to privatisé the municipally-owned water utility, SEMAPA, and replace it by a similar French-style concession contract. But these efforts came to a temporary halt in 1997 because of municipal opposition to a major dam project to bring much-needed water to the city, which was an integral part of the option preferred by the Bank.

World Bank ambivalence towards the co-operative option for UWS was manifest in the December 1997 decision by the Bolivian Government to refuse to provide the necessary guarantee to enable SAGUAPAC to obtain a $25m World Bank loan in order to finance its on-going investment programme. The decision was taken on the grounds that new investment in UWS should be carried out exclusively by the private sector, a strategic decision that had been forced on the government by the Bank itself. Despite the excellent track record of SAGUAPAC in the use and repayment of past loans, Bank officials did not intervene on behalf of SAGUAPAC to press the government to reverse its decision. And in 1998 the Bolivian government established a national regulatory agency for water utilities, Superintendencia de Aguas, under pressure from the World Bank. As part of this initiative, the Bank is preparing a technical assistance project for Regulatory Reform and Privatisation of water utilities in Bolivia, one of the objectives of which is to "convert water co-operatives into corporations with private investment in order to comply with investment and operational requirements" (World Bank:35).

Conclusion

The major strategic challenge facing governments in most developing countries today with regard to UWS is the attainment of affordable access to clean water for all urban residents. The key policy objective in order to achieve this goal is to bring about organizational strengthening of water utilities to the point where they introduce self-financing. Without the improved productive efficiency and cost-reflective tariff policies required to achieve self-financing, investment and the delivery of services will remain in deficit and the quality of the service will remain poor.

Pressure from powerful transnational corporations are today a significant factor in the move towards greater PSP in UWS world wide. Two diversified conglomerates with headquarters in
France - VIVENDI (formerly Compagnie Générale des Eaux) and Lyonnaise des Eaux - dominate this emerging global market in UWS. Market penetration by these companies has been greatly assisted by the fact that the World Bank strongly advocates the Francophone model of PSP in UWS for developing countries in the belief that it is the only realistic way to force the cultural changes within water utilities that are necessary in order to achieve self-financing (Triche).

This view is questionable. The major attraction of PSP is that it is perceived as being able to "deliver the goods" in terms of achieving self-financing in a far more effective manner than by a reform strategy that retains public sector control. But the experience of SAGUAPAC suggests that the co-operative model is a tested and viable alternative to the privatisation of water utilities. Furthermore, in countries where contracts granted by the public sector to the private sector have traditionally provided fertile ground for corruption, the danger exists that such illicit rent-seeking activity could negate the efficiency gains associated with lease and concession contracts. In many countries, regulatory structures are still embryonic, in others they lack transparency, while in others they appear to be excessively complex in their organisational structure, laying them vulnerable to political interference. By contrast, the experience of SAGUAPAC suggests that the co-operative is an extremely effective organisational arrangement for avoiding the political interference that have had such negative effects on the performance of other UWS utilities.

Bibliography


NOTAS

[1] In Argentina 683 UWS systems, equivalent to 35% of the national total and covering 9% of the population served, were owned and operated by co-operatives in 1988 but none of them covered a major city (Brunstein:28-32). Texto

[2] The civic movement spawned a strong business association that has spearheaded the long-term development of the city. Known as the Comit, Pro-Santa Cruz, it today encompasses representatives of some 200 private industrial and professional companies in the city. It sees itself very much as the 'gobierno moral' (moral conscience) of the city. Texto

[3] SAGUAPAC has received criticism for the surcharge applied to bills in order to recoup the cost of previous investment. This quota figure of $400 was determined by dividing the total cost of infrastructure provision by the number of connections in 1985. A 20% fixed surcharge was then applied to all customer bills until the amount was paid off. Texto

[4] The consensus emerged out of two major conferences - the International Conference on Water and the Environment (Dublin) and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the 'Rio Conference') - both of which were held in 1992. This new consensus subsequently appeared in major policy statements by the World Bank (1993) and the OECD (1994). Texto

[5] This is true in all cases except for district delegates to the general assembly, all of whose six year term of office expires at the same time. Texto

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