Co-producing water services in peri-urban Caracas: political democratization without administrative decentralization?

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In recent years, the co-production of water services in the peri-urban context of the Caracas Metropolitan Region (CMR) (Venezuela) has produced both improvements in access to basic services and innovative governance arrangements. This experience is paralleled by a high degree of experimentation across Latin America, seeking to bridge collaboration between service utilities and grassroots collectives not only to fill in service deficits at local scale but also to democratize water governance and the relation between the state and ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, the Venezuelan experience presents some distinctive features. Here, the process of attempting to democratize the governance structure of the water sector depends on the institutionalization of the negotiation between the urban and peri-urban poor and a statal centralized structure, without the direct participation of local authorities. This chapter examines critically how the relationship between political democratization and administrative decentralization might be less straightforward than often assumed in current debates about water governance. The discussion draws on fieldwork conducted by the authors in the CRM in 2004 and 2006.

Coproduction des services d’eau dans les zones périurbaines de Caracas : démocratisation politique sans décentralisation administrative?

Ces dernières années, la coproduction des services d’eau dans le contexte périurbain de la Région Métropolitaine de Caracas (Venezuela) a produit des améliorations dans l’accès aux services de base et également des systèmes innovants de gouvernance. Cette expérience s’insère dans un cadre plus large d’expérimentations dans tout le continent latino-américain qui vise au développement de collaborations entre les opérateurs de services et les collectivités de base, non seulement pour améliorer les services, mais également pour démocratiser la gouvernance de l’eau et les relations entre l’état et les citoyens. Cependant, l’expérience vénézuélienne présente des particularités. Ici, les tentatives de démocratisation de la structure de gouvernance du secteur de l’eau reposent sur l’institutionnalisation de la délégation entre les pauvres urbains et périurbains, et une structure centralisée étatique, sans la participation directe des autorités locales. Ce chapitre examine de manière critique comment la relation entre la démocratisation politique et la décentralisation administrative peut être moins claire que ce qui est couramment mis en avant dans les débats sur la gouvernance de l’eau. La discussion se fonde sur deux travaux de terrains développés au Venezuela par les auteurs en 2004 et 2006.

19.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines emerging governance arrangements to co-produce water services in the peri-urban context of the Caracas Metropolitan Region (CMR), Venezuela. At the core of this initiative are the “technical water committees or fora” – Mesas Técnicas de Agua (MTA) – built for the purpose of channelling community participation in the decision-making process and carrying out physical improvements to service delivery. This innovation seems to have been particularly effective in improving access to basic services by the peri-urban poor, setting

an institutionalized bridge for public utilities and collectives of the poor to work together in areas where urbanization without infrastructure appears to be the norm. Drawing on field research conducted by the authors in 2004 and 2006, and on a recent desk-study on service decentralization in Venezuela, the paper examines the implementation of the MTA system in the southern periphery of the CRM, known as the Tuy Valleys.

In recent years, the provision of basic services has been underpinned by a high level of experimentation throughout Latin America, seeking active forms of articulation between the state and civil society. To a large extent, such experimentation has been fuelled by a generalized disenchantment with the neoliberal policies adopted in the region in the 1990s. The gaps left by several attempts to privatize water utilities have heralded a shift away from the commodification of services and a return to the state’s commitment to guarantee universal service provision, or at least to reach those falling through the net of market-driven approaches. What sets the Venezuelan experience aside from others in the region is that state efforts to enhance the rights and opportunities of the urban and peri-urban poor to participate in the design and delivery of water services have been implemented without the direct participation of local authorities. Hence, this chapter examines the process of attempting to democratize the governance structure of the sector, institutionalizing the participation of the peri-urban poor in direct negotiation with a statal centralized structure. This is of interest because service democratization and decentralization are often assumed to go hand in hand, yet the experience analyzed allows a critical examination of this hypothesis and a nuanced exploration of the politics shaping the relationship between poor women and men and the state in the peri-urban context.

The next section explores why debates on how to address water poverty (Allen & Bell, 2011) are increasingly acknowledging the complexity of peri-urban landscapes and shifting away from either hierarchical or market-based approaches to service provision. Section 19.3 outlines the process of socio-territorial segregation in the peri-urban Tuy Valleys, a territory that has historically played a key role in supplying water to metropolitan Caracas and in housing large sectors of the poor. Section 19.4 analyzes the changing architecture of water governance and the institutionalization of service co-production during the Chavez administration, focusing on the roles of the central and local state. The final section discusses the outcomes of this experience and reflects on why local authorities have been sidelined in this process, assessing the potentials and risks of service democratization without decentralization.

19.2. PERI-URBANIZATION WITHOUT INFRASTRUCTURE: FROM ORTHODOX SERVICE DELIVERY TO STATE-CITIZEN CO-PRODUCTION

Approximately 45% of the 1.4 billion people who will join the world’s urban population by 2020 will live in peri-urbanizing areas (Webster, 2004), a process closely associated with the emergence of a “lumpy rural–urban continuum”, where extreme poverty and wealth often coexist and where “peri-urbanization without infrastructure” is often the norm (Allen, 2003). Research conducted in five urban-regions (Allen et al., 2006) confirms that, when it comes to access to water and sanitation, the peri-urban poor are often outside networked infrastructures. Indeed, across the South, the locus of water poverty appears to be shifting to the so-called “peri-urban interface”, where access to services is organized, not through “networks” but through a complex landscape of infrastructural “archipelagos” (Marshall et al., 2009; Allen, 2014).
The realization that the conventional urban-rural distinction is becoming increasingly inept to capture the aforementioned landscapes has also coincided with general agreement on the necessity to go beyond the public/private divide in service provision (Batley, 2006; Bakker, 2010; McDonald & Ruiers, 2012). The role of the so-called “third sector” in the governance of service provision has also been the subject of much debate in recent years, highlighting the need to go beyond instrumental approaches to community participation that fall back to hierarchical top-down and market-driven governance arrangements (Maloutas & Malouta, 2004; Miraftab, 2004; Parker & Debruyn, 2012).

Looking for alternatives to orthodox service delivery models, two options are increasingly gaining momentum in current debates. The first one entails a reconsideration of the role played by informal and small-scale independent private water providers across urban and peri-urban areas in the South (Allen et al., 2006; Phumpiu & Gustafsson, 2008; Batley & McIoughlin, 2010; Booth, 2011). The second path seeks alternative service delivery options has focused on the notion of service co-production, originally coined by Ostrom (1973) to capture the possibility of deploying combined inputs from individuals and collectives in different organizations in the actual provision of a service. Over time, co-production became used to focus more specifically on the potential role of ordinary citizens “in producing public goods and services of consequence to them” (Ostrom, 1996). In the same wake, Brudney & England (1983) argue that service co-production implies “citizen involvement or participation (rather than bureaucratic responsiveness)”, involving voluntary cooperation and active behavior.

Research on the co-production of basic services has experienced an important revival in recent years and scholars are increasingly investigating the many forms co-production can assume. It may be initiated by citizens or governments (Jakobsen, 2012); it may include third sector, public and for-profit organisations (Verschuere et al., 2012). Furthermore, co-production might be disaggregated into different services activities such as co-planning, co-design, co-managing and co-delivery (Bovaird & Leoffler, 2012); and focus on the operational level – “consumer co-production” – on the strategic one – “participative co-production” – or integrate both levels in the form of “enhanced co-production” for public service reform and innovation (Osborne & Strokosh, 2013). Echoing Brudney & England (1983) who highlight that “the more important participants from both practical and equity standpoints are collectivities”, service co-production in southern cities generally includes ordinary citizens, not as individuals but mostly through their participation in grassroots, community-based organisations (Batley, 2006; Mitlin, 2008; Peters & Muraleedharan, 2008; Allen, 2010; Batley & McIoughlin, 2010; Moretto, 2010; Booth, 2011; Allen, 2012; McGranahan, 2013; McMillan et al., 2014).

The concept of “institutionalized co-production” (Joshi & Moore, 2004) is particularly useful in this context, as it focuses on “the provision of public services (broadly defined, to include regulation) through regular, long-term relationships between state agencies and organized groups of citizens, where both make substantial resource contribution”. Interesting in this definition is the move from a market-centred approach to service delivery towards a state and community-centred form of development. Institutionalized co-production – as described by Joshi & Moore (2004) – enables the examination of state-citizen social contracts in some important respects. First, it excludes temporary cooperative arrangements, capturing instead long-term arrangements developed on a regular basis. Second, it acknowledges that the relationship between state agencies and citizens might be open to constant negotiation and that standardized contractual and/or semi-contractual agreements might raise challenges when compared with the capacity of informal agreements to enable local and informal providers to
continue delivering services to the poor without being excluded by tight contractual regulation and without being subordinated to formal agencies (Batley, 2006). Third, institutionalized co-production entails that power, authority and control of resources are shared between the state and groups of citizens in a way that might establish interdependent and ambiguous relationships as well as blurred boundaries between the public and citizens spheres.

In short, in contrast with the conventional research on co-production that has focused “on joint forms of service delivery within contextual and institutional analysis” (Mitlin, 2008), a focus on institutionalized co-production implies an explicit engagement with the political dimension of resources management by challenging not only the technical organization of service delivery, but also its power distribution (McGranahan, 2013; McMillan et al., 2014). Allen (2010; 2012), amongst others, has explored different trajectories of citizen-state co-production in the peri-urbanizing context of the South, and also its actual and potential impact not just on tackling water poverty but also as a mean towards water justice and democracy (Allen et al., 2015). This form of co-production finds an excellent application in Venezuela.

19.3. WATER SERVICE PROVISION IN THE SOUTHERN PERI-URBAN INTERFACE OF THE CARACAS METROPOLITAN REGION

Over the last five decades, Caracas city has experienced significant growth in population, functions and relationships that has resulted in its expansion beyond its topographical barriers, into peri-urban areas (Cariola & Lacabana, 2007). Nowadays, the Caracas Metropolitan Region (CMR)\(^1\) accounts for about five million inhabitants (Delgado Linero, 2013) and comprises the Metropolitan Area of Caracas located in the central valley and an additional four geographical sub-regions, including the Tuy Valleys in the Southern sub-region (Figure 19.1). The latter exhibits a mixture of rural and urban features making this sub-region a typical peri-urban interface. First, from an ecological perspective, the Tuy Valleys have experienced in recent decades a significant loss of agricultural land and ecological services due mainly to urban expansion (Cariola & Lacabana, 2007).

Second, with respect to demographic trends, the Tuy Valleys sub-region exhibited one of the fastest population growth rates in the CMR area, by the end of the last century, partly attracted by the availability of “free” or relatively cheap land to house those unable to afford more central locations. In addition to land market forces, state-housing policies identified this area as a territory where low-income households, including those affected by the Vargas natural disaster of 1999, could be relocated (De Lisio, 2009). As a result, the Tuy Valleys have been playing an increasingly significant role in housing the labour force that service the inner city, while becoming one of the main locations for the vulnerable, marginalized and low-income strata of the population.

Third, socio-economically, the Tuy Valleys are home to heterogeneous groups, housing both low-income dwellers – characterized by high rates of unemployment and levels of poverty well above national averages\(^2\) – and middle-income residents in formally recognized

\(^1\) The CMR is divided into three administrative entities: the Capital District, the Miranda State and the Vargas State. The Tuy Valleys belong to the Miranda State and comprise six municipalities.

Figure 19.1. Map of the Caracas Metropolitan Region. Adapted from Cariola & Lacabana (2007).
neighbors, *vis-a-vis* old and new informal settlements. The latter have proliferated particularly along the railway tracks of the fast train connection between Charallave and Caracas, with a high percentage of peri-urban dwellers commuting daily to the city. Beyond national investments to promote the deconcentration of economic and residential activities away from the national capital, the Tuy Valleys continue acting as dormitory areas and daily commuting to Caracas takes place under severe overcrowded conditions.

Fourth, as argued by Allen et al. (2006), the Tuy Valleys perform important ecological functions, acting as a “water net-exporting region”, where paradoxically its inhabitants have historically lived in water poverty. This sub-region provides drinking water to both the Caracas Metropolitan area and the Middle Tuy cities, through the Losada-Ocumarito. The catchment area comprises the Tuy River Basin, the Guárico River Basin and the Taguaza River Basin. Water is treated in 14 stations and then channelled through more than 200 pump stations (Martínez, 2013) (Figure 19.2). Drinking water supplies often require particular efforts as wastewater from the residential and industrial areas is dumped into the rivers without any treatment (De Lisio, 2009; Martínez, 2013). In addition, with the population growing in both the Tuy Valleys and the Caracas Metropolitan area, water production has proved to be inadequate in responding to the demand related to drinking water and the treatment of sewerage, especially in low-income settlements. Furthermore, priority over drinking water provisions is given to the inner city supply, rather than to the Tuy Valleys urbanized areas.

Despite significant improvements in the cost recovery of service expenditures, the water supply system in the Tuy Valleys appears to experience the same structural shortcomings that affect water production and provision at the national level. Rates of unaccounted water are still high (about 60% of the total water production), largely due to water losses in the infrastructure system, illegal connections, free water delivered to informal settlements and a widespread culture of non-payment for the service. In addition, the ratio between employees in the hydrological companies and the number of service subscribers is high, and tariffs are exceedingly low – often frozen by central governments (1981 and 2003) – covering only 40% of costs and undermining the financial viability of the service providers. There is, therefore, a large dependence on central investments for infrastructure’s maintenance and expansion (Lacabana, 2003; Corrales, 2004; Escalona et al., 2009; IDB, 2011).

In institutional terms, the CMR does not enjoy a regional government to ensure planning coherence but instead experiences high levels of institutional fragmentation, which contribute to local governments’ incapacity to respond to local population needs and demands. Nevertheless, according to Cariola & Lacabana (2007), the public policies implemented in the last decade to support social reforms and strengthen citizen participation are tackling the existing forms of socio-territorial exclusion prevailing in this peri-urban interface, providing room for collective and cooperative action, and hence improvements in the living conditions of the peri-urban poor. A central component of the policies implemented to tackle segregation in this complex peri-urban landscape has been associated to the establishment of a new governance regime introduced by the Chavez administration since 1998, sought to redistribute public investments in basic infrastructure and services through the establishment of the MTA, examined in the next section.
Figure 19.2. Water infrastructure: the Tuy systems. Adapted from IMUTUC (2012) and other HIDROCAPITAL’s maps.
19.4. BETWEEN CENTRALIZED AND DECENTRALIZED SERVICE CO-PRODUCTION

In Venezuela, the governance of water production and provision has undergone significant changes over the last two decades. Until the early 1990s, the provision of water and sanitation services was the responsibility of INOS (Instituto de Obras Sanitarias), a state-owned enterprise established in 1943, under the Plan Quinquenal 1941-1946 (Marcano, 1993). This national body was characterized by a highly centralized planning and management system designed to supply water to the whole nation and prioritized social objectives over economic efficiency (Corrales, 2004).

Centralized water management and governance was firstly challenged by the closure of INOS in 1991. The economic and political strategy at the time was to decentralize service provision to local governments, legally entrusted with such role by the 1989 Organic Municipal Government Act. On the one hand, this shift was seen as a suitable response to the deterioration of service provision and declining financial capacity of the national state, due to the fall of oil revenues during the 1980s (Goldfrank, 2004). On the other hand, the new emphasis on decentralization was consistent with the general modernization process set off in the Venezuelan economy in the 1990s and the economic and institutional neoliberal adjustment programmes adopted in the late 1980s. Until the eventual responsibilities transfer to municipalities, water services were temporarily entrusted to ten regional water companies – under the holding company HIDROVEN – and to the Corporación Venezolana de Guayana. In reality, municipalities were unwilling to assume service provision responsibilities because of their poor financial conditions and the absence of municipal investment plans together with incentives to charge for the service (IDB, 1998). Thus, the service continued to be centrally managed.

A second wave of reforms was triggered by the 2001 Organic Water and Sanitation Law (Ley Orgánica para la Prestación de los Servicios de Agua Potable y Saneamiento – LOPSAPS), which reorganized responsibilities across three levels. First, the law established the responsibility of the national government to create technically and economically sustainable water management units (Unidades de Gestión) and to establish three new bodies: the National Office for the Development of Drinking Water and Sanitation Services, the National Superintendency of Drinking Water and Sanitation Services, and the National Management Company. Second, the law reconfirms that water supply is the responsibility of municipal governments, in coordination with the MTA and in collaboration with potential external service providers. However, the new regulatory structure based on the three national bodies has not yet been created and HIDROVEN is still the only regulatory body for water and sanitation in Venezuela (IDB, 2011; Higuerey et al., 2012; Martínez, 2013). Furthermore, the deadline to transfer responsibility from HIDROVEN to the municipalities has been delayed through successive amendments (LOPSAPS, 2007). Higuerey et al. (2012) reported that “up to now,

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3 Two structural adjustment packages were implemented in Venezuela: the first in 1989 and the second in 1996 (Smilde, 2011).
4 As before, they are responsible to provide the service (directly by the municipality or the metropolitan district, by associations of municipalities, or through public, private or mixed enterprises); they have to define the management model, the involvement of private companies, the tariffs, the regulation, control and sanctioning procedures for service provision.
5 As per December 2013.
neither the bodies have been created nor have new processes for the transfer of the service to municipalities been opened. For the first one, the deadline has almost arrived while for the latter one only two years are left.”

Beside this institutional stalemate, the third actor foreseen by the LOPSAPS – the MTA – have developed at a fast pace, representing a remarkable innovation to democratize the service delivery process, through which citizens are requested to act under locally-based associations to mobilize local potentialities and knowledge on water supply while working for the benefit of the whole community. The first MTA, however, is not a product of the Chavez administration but emerged in 1993, in the Antinano parroquia within the Libertador Municipality in Caracas. According to Arconada (1996), at that time, the municipality and the water company HIDROCAPITAL acknowledged the importance of community participation in the delivery of drinking water and agreed not only to directly inform citizens about service distribution but also to change procedures and attitudes to strengthen their involvement in service delivery. Building upon this precedent, during the Chávez administration the MTA entered into the legal water provision system, inaugurating what has been described as a new era in the democratization of water politics in Venezuela (Lacabana et al., 2004). From 1999 onwards, HIDROVEN established a Citizen Participation Program in order to replicate and strengthen the experience of the water boards at the national level and community participation in water and sanitation services became firmly institutionalized and recognized in the LOPSAPS (2001).

From an operational perspective, MTAs produce a map of the settlement and existing water pipelines (formal and informal), a water survey examining households’ needs and how they are actually access water. These inputs inform a local diagnosis and subsequent water project plan elaborated in collaboration with the hydrological company. The construction of the water project involves both inputs from the hydrological enterprise and the settlement’s residents. Generally, the water company funds and installs the main pipe through which the informal settlement is connected to the formal water network. Afterwards, company workers and settlement residents build the secondary water connections together, based on a further settlement subdivision in “condominiums” (smaller areas sharing one or a few secondary pipelines) to which individual households connect through hand-made plastic connections. Within the CMR, water extraction, treatment, storage and distribution is currently the responsibility of HIDROCAPITAL (the hydrological company part of HIDROVEN), with distribution performed in collaboration with the MTA system and, partially with the state and municipal governments.

We argue (Allen, 2010; Moretto, 2010; Allen, 2012; Moretto, 2014; Allen et al., 2015) that this shift in the architecture of water governance can be conceptualized as a case of institutionalized service co-production for a number of reasons. First, the system is based on horizontal relationships between organized citizens (MTA) and state institutions (the water companies). As argued by Lopez & Lander (2011), such system can be read as a “strategy to reach social equilibrium” through the inclusion of two fundamental actors: on the one hand, “the state, in all of its administrative levels and branches, as the creator of conditions that make possible the empowerment of citizens” and on the other hand, “citizens, who through their participation in families, communities, and organized groups are transforming themselves into political subjects with values such as solidarity, respect for democracy procedures, and co-responsibility”.

Second, long term co-production is ensured through relationships running alongside the process of mapping and surveying, designing and realising the project, managing and
maintaining the water network, and collecting payments. Third, these relationships are mainly informal – based on personal contacts amongst community members and between community members and public institutions – and they evolve during the implementation of the water project (Moretto, 2014). Fourth, state-community collaboration is based on co-responsibility (Lacabana et al., 2004) from the outset, organized communities and state water agencies cooperate to develop the water network, to jointly define and decide on the water project, to fund and construct the network and to organize the payment collection. As stressed by Mitlin (2008) with respect to self-organized co-production, “the objective [of co-production] is not simply to develop a model that is passed over to state employees to manage and/or to take over as the state gains in capacity”, but also “to build up a new form of citizenship based on the hypothesis of participatory democracy” (Lacabana et al., 2008). This kind of co-responsibility in co-production represents a way of sharing power, authority and control over resources between the state and ordinary citizens.

19.5. SERVICE CO-PRODUCTION REVISITED: POLITICAL DEMOCRATIZATION WITHOUT ADMINISTRATIVE DECENTRALIZATION?

The outcomes of the experience reviewed point to a number of achievements both in meeting the water needs of peri-urban dwellers and enabling decentralized provision, and in empowering typically marginalized peri-urban actors to play an active role in the design and implementation of the system. First, institutionalized service co-production has enabled a more equitable redistribution of the service, reaching peri-urban low-income settlements where water was not previously provided, overcoming local government delays and/or the obstacles to setting up organizational changes, and producing a responsive water supply system, both to the diversity of local needs and operational situations (Arconada, 2005; Lacabana et al., 2008; Moretto, 2010; Lopez & Lander, 2011; Allen, 2012; McMillan et al., 2014; Moretto, 2014). According to our field research, improvements in water access also produced improvements in the quality of life of the peri-urban poor, as people were no longer forced to queue for water from tanker trucks, and social conflicts and tensions linked to the purchase of full tankers by those closer to the main roads (leaving other residents waiting for up to 4-5 days for the following trucks) were reduced or eliminated. Furthermore, the cost of water was dramatically reduced as construction and connection costs for low-income residents were shared amongst the water company, the community and – to a limited extent – the municipality.

Second, the MTA system has the potential to reduce the socio-spatial segregation of the peri-urban poor, enabling people to move from a sort of “privatization” of their social life (Lacabana et al., 2008) where problems were solved by “an individualistic and competitive approach to service access” (Moretto, 2010) to a new appropriation of the public sphere that takes place not only in the collective space of the community, but also at the institutional level (McMillan et al., 2014). Local governance arrangements developing around the MTAs

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4 However, peri-urban dwellers often still suffer from very different access conditions at the intra-community level, revealing socio-spatial micro-fragmentations within the settlements (Navez-Bouchane, 2002; Moretto, 2010). For instance, despite being connected to the same system, households often experience different water pressure depending on their relative location, or struggle to access water due to the clandestine connections made by more recent informal settlements.
in collaboration with other key stakeholders in the water provision process have the potential to open up new democratic spaces of engagement, communication and negotiation across citizens and the state, which appear to be far more effective than more formal, official and bureaucratic instruments.

However, these positive outcomes were realized without administrative decentralization. Research in the Southern periphery of Caracas reveals that the municipality is the missing link between the central state and citizens in local governance arrangements. Here, local governments have unclear powers and limited financial resources in the operation of basic services, including water. In practice, responsibilities for service organization and management are delegated at the community level rather than at the municipal one, while the state-owned water company HIDROCAPITAL continues to be the only official institution supplying drinking water, working directly with low-income communities and organizing the MTAs. This confirms a more general difficulty faced by Venezuelan municipalities in managing local affairs in a decentralized manner. Many critics actually contend that the uncertainty linked to the blurred roles and responsibilities that municipalities hold in the delivery of public services – because of concurrent responsibilities with the Communal Councils7, for instance – and the insufficiency and rigidity of the financial resource allocation framework – through for example the Constitutional and Municipal Situado, and the Inter-territorial Compensation Fund – show that priority has been given to the political ideal of decentralization rather than to its technical execution (Leal et al., 2003; Mascareño, 2003; McCoy & Meyers, 2004; Moreno, 2008). In addition, effective responsiveness to water supply needs rests principally on the MTA’s capacity to establish regular channels of communication with the institutions involved in the service delivery process and to provide them with updated information regarding water access conditions in the settlement, as well as on HIDROCAPITAL’s availability to work with low-income communities. In any case, responsiveness to water supply needs does not rest on the existence of municipal mechanisms aimed at facilitating communication and information.

The political attempt, through the LOPSAPS, to democratize water governance through administrative decentralization and citizen participation seems to have been translated on the ground in a reduction of the actors involved in the delivery process (basically, the water company and the MTAs). This in turn bypasses the closest officially elected institutional body to the citizens (the municipality), which finds itself in the uncomfortable position of being unaccountable to citizens. As underlined by Brewer-Carías’s (2010) analysis of democracy in Venezuela, the absence of local territorial autonomy and decentralization – mainly because of power concentration with direct involvement of organized groups of citizens, which strengthen the link between people and the central state may turn the potential for genuine democratic participation into simple popular mobilization (Mascareño, 2003; McCoy & Meyers, 2004; Lalande & Samaniego, 2005; Rachadell, 2006; Penfold, 2010; Smilde, 2011; Córdova, 2012; Borgucci, 2013). The dilution of public accountability through the co-production of services can, thus, undermine the viability of these experiences in the long run.

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7 The Communal Councils are a citizen representative body established in 2006. Many critics contend that, by profiting from their general responsibilities and direct relationships with the national executive power, are replacing municipalities in providing services (D’Elia, 2010; Peraza, 2012) together with absorbing MTAs functions, and, on the other, they also benefit from direct national funds, such as the Fund for Inter-territorial Cooperation, which partially reduces the financial autonomy of local governments (Moreno, 2008; Rios et al., 2012).
It seems hence reasonable to wonder whether the current institutionalized co-production of water services, strongly structured around a multitude of water committees and a centralized public enterprise, could be considered a genuine democratic alternative to dominant governance modes (hierarchies or markets) or if it still belongs to a state-centric approach (as suggested by some authors such as Cordova (2012), Peraza (2012) and Borgucci (2013)), where the central power has ensured itself political support by entrusting small pockets of power to a multitude of citizen organizations. Evidence from our analysis shows – at least to a certain extent – that recent governing practices to improve access to water supply appear (still) strongly dependent on the central state politics⁴, suggesting potential risks to consolidate water democracy in peri-urban territories.

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⁴ For a detailed analysis: see Moretto (2014) and Allen et al. (2015).


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