

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WATER CRISIS. THE CASE OF SAN LUIS POTOSI, MÉXICO

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Like many countries, Mexico faces serious problems in the administration of its water system. In spite of a legal commitment to universal service, the country is unable to guarantee basic services of drinking water, drainage and sewage to all its citizens. Although official data claim that 90% of population has access to potable water, and 77% is connected to the drainage system, the real numbers are much lower; more than 10 million people continue without access to drinking water and almost 20 million without drainage. Problems are further exacerbated by the low level of treatment of residual waters; only 30%, according to official data, is treated. These data reflects a dismal picture of inequality, inequity, social injustice and environment degradation. The poorest social groups pay the highest price for water and receive the poorest quality, while small groups of the powerful enjoy good water service. The Mexican water bureaucracy responds to the demands of these small groups at the expense of the majority.

The historical water allocation system in Mexico favors capitalist accumulation that benefits its richest sectors while putting at risk resource its availability for future generations. It may actually be also placing at risk the process of capital accumulation itself by destroying the environmental conditions needed for life. At the moment, Mexico has 104 overexploited aquifers –in areas of highest population density– of a total 653, and there are 17 aquifers with saline intrusion.

The case study in this paper offers a detailed examination of the water management system in the Metropolitan Area of San Luis Potosi in the national context. The regional management system occasions important social and environmental problems. Access to drinking water is not universal leading to high costs and poor quality for the poorest groups. Further complicating the situation, the regional aquifer is overexploited, threatening the ecosystems due to high mineral content that threaten human health. Another serious problem is discharge of partially treated sewage water, generating serious risks to human and environment health. The analysis demonstrates that the current water crisis in the Metropolitan Area of San Luis Potosi has been socially constructed as a result of the deliberate intervention of the political and business communities in contravention of the recommendations of social and technical analyses.

The document uses the Political Ecology framework to analyze the water crisis, offering a set of categories and methodologies to understand better the current socio-environmental crisis. Water authorities in the region have shaped the water management system to suite the interests of a well-defined elite. The elite's interests to expand the regional economy and accelerate urbanization are the main drivers behind the social construction of water crisis. They have done this in violation of the National Water Law, implementing an industrial model for the growth of the Metropolitan Area, designed to create one of the largest urban centers in Mexico in the coming decades. The analysis suggests that social participation is necessary to confront and resolve the region's environmental and social problems as a counterforce to the economic and political interests on water management from the elites. This social participation has to

contribute to the recovery of the aquifer and to the universal provision of potable water and sewage treatment.