



Lessons Learned

Process of Change for a Municipal Water and Sanitation Service Strategy in Omoa



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Background

In Honduras, the coverage of water and sanitation services continues to be a challenge. 9.3 per cent of households do not have an adequate water service and 7.3 per cent do not have an appropriate sanitation system. These services are deficient in terms of quality, particularly in rural areas. In urban areas the use of toilets connected to the sewerage system is predominant, while in rural areas most households use simple pit latrines and others lack some form of excreta disposal (INE 2022).

This document refers to the Municipality of Omoa, located in the Department of Cortés. The municipality has a territorial extension of 382 km². The rural area of Omoa is divided into 40 villages and 144 hamlets, while the urban area is divided into eight neighbourhoods and 18 colonies. The population is distributed 94% in the rural area and the remaining percentage in the urban area. Omoa is a popular tourist attraction due to its coastal location and the beauty of its white sandy beaches and crystal clear waters (J. G. and D. 2019).

Currently, the municipality of Omoa does not provide public services. Water supply is administered by the Omoa Water Board, access to drinking water is distributed in 93.43% where households obtain the service through the public or private system, and 6.57% obtain it through other sources, such as rivers or wells (Gobernación, 2022). Solid waste is usually collected by private individuals who transport it to the dump or burn it on their land. Meanwhile, the electricity service is provided by the Empresa Nacional de Energía Eléctrica (ENEE) (Guarch, 2022).

On the other hand, the municipality of Omoa is affected annually by external factors, such as the tons of solid waste from Guatemala. The root cause is the poor waste management in 35 Guatemalan villages near the Motagua River, whose waste is washed down the river and ends up on the beaches of Omoa and Puerto Cortés. Moreover, accelerated coastal erosion has caused the disappearance of two communities due to rising sea levels (World Bank Group, 2022).

This highlights the need for the GEF CReW+ project, which aims to support Honduras in its institutional development and management capacities to address challenges in the water and sanitation sector. The project promotes the development of standards, strategies and policies related to integrated water and wastewater management. With the aim of providing long-term services, the project identifies sustainable financing mechanisms, such as payment for environmental services and the creation of incentives. In addition, it provides technical solutions covering the design, construction or rehabilitation of wastewater treatment plants and sanitation facilities (GEF CReW+ Project, 2021).

The challenge

Currently, the Municipality of Omoa is not assuming financial and administrative responsibility for public services. The Omoa Water Board is in charge of the drinking water supply in the area, and although it is a well-recognised community organisation, it does not have the resources or organisational structure to provide a quality and efficient service (Guarch, 2022).

Drinking water service is billed at a flat rate, without metering, which does not promote the rational use of water resources. Households pay less than \$2 per month, while hotels and restaurants pay less than \$12. These amounts limit the Water Board's investment and borrowing capacity. Therefore, it is necessary to implement a metered tariff to cover operation and maintenance costs in the short term, and in the long term, to cover future investments (Guarch, 2022).

The Water Board faces different challenges to achieve financial sustainability and expansion of its services. One of the main problems is that it has a limited number of employees, five permanent employees to serve more than 2000 customers. The employees lack the necessary training and professional advice to serve the users satisfactorily (Guarch, 2022).

In addition, it was found that homes and businesses use septic tanks without the necessary lining, which increases the risk of infiltration into the soil and negatively affects the environmental conservation of water bodies. On the other hand, the department of Project Coordination and Formulation of the Municipality does not specialise in water and sanitation issues, which has resulted in the submission of projects that do not meet the technical requirements. It is therefore important to have a department specialised in the formulation and development of water and sanitation projects (Guarch, 2022).

Structure and Strategy of the GEF CReW+ project

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) has provided \$22 million in grants and financial resources and mobilized nearly \$120 billion in co-financing for more than 5,200 projects and programmes. The GEF is the largest trust fund focused on enabling developing countries to invest in nature and supports the implementation of international conventions on biodiversity, climate change, chemicals, and desertification. It brings together 184 governments, as well as civil society, international organizations, the private sector, and partners.

The GEF CReW+ is a partnership project funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) that is being co-implemented by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 18 countries of the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR). The concept was initially approved in November 2017 for an amount of approximately 15 million USD by the GEF Trust Fund.

This innovative project builds upon its previous successful phase “The Caribbean Regional Fund for Wastewater Management (CReW)” project (2011-2017). CReW+ is being executed by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the Organisation of the American States (OAS) and the Secretariat of the Cartagena Convention on behalf of the IDB and UNEP respectively. In the case of Honduras, activities were implemented by GIZ, in partnership with the Secretariat of Natural Resources and Environment (SERNA), delegating the Centre for Studies and Control of Pollutants (CESCCO) as national counterpart in the project.

The CReW+ project in Honduras is implemented under four components. The first of these, Component I, focuses on governance. Component II has as its main objective the development of financing mechanisms. Component III is dedicated to the implementation of technological innovations for integrated water and sanitation management. Finally, Component IV focuses on knowledge management, gathering and disseminating relevant information about the project. In this document, Component II will be analysed, which addresses:

- Promote financial sustainability in the drinking water and sanitation sector through the development of a financing plan between the private, public and community sectors, to promote projects for the expansion, coverage and quality of sanitation services in low-income communities, ensuring the economic and financial sustainability of the projects.
- Promote the creation of an inter-sectoral memorandum of understanding to be adopted at the community, private sector and municipality level of Omoa to improve the practice of water conservation and pollution prevention in Omoa beach.

In order to implement the project activities, a face-to-face diagnosis was carried out, including meetings and workshops with representatives of the Municipality and local stakeholders. This diagnosis was crucial, as it influenced the activities that were originally defined by the project for Omoa. As mentioned above, there are multiple challenges and obstacles that need to be addressed as a priority. Therefore, these constraints must be considered from the outset as an integral part of the activities to be developed by the project.

This meant that the activities that were initially planned for Component II, although they were not fully implemented, focused entirely on institutional strengthening and the creation of the necessary conditions for the governance of the water and sanitation sector. And they created a positive contribution in leveraging a **process of change** as a reference for other municipalities in Honduras.

This initial accompaniment and the continuous follow-up with the actors involved allowed to build trust and consent to implement the project activities, which resulted in a fluid communication in the tasks carried out in Component II. The participation of the

representatives of the Municipality and local actors in this process was fundamental to adapt and adjust the project to the specific needs of the local context.

In the first instance, a Commitment for Sustainability was signed on February 25, 2022, between the Municipality and local actors, to improve the conditions of the drinking water service and to improve its conservation, as well as a future planning of a sanitary sewerage system in the area, reflecting the willingness of the Municipality to assume this responsibility. Some of the commitments are:

- That the Municipality, in its capacity as owner of the service, authorises the provision of the service to an entity to be created other than the Water Board.
- Ensure the technical, organisational and resource solvency to properly manage the system.
- The service should be financed through tariffs based on actual consumption.
- Ensure technical, organisational and resource solvency to adequately manage the system (Guarch, 2022).

Advancing in this process of change that involves the Municipality exercising its role as service provider requires planning a series of activities to be executed in a consistent and articulated manner under committed leadership. To this end, a working group was formed with the technical team of the Municipality of Omoa, which worked with the support of the project, structuring ideas to define a municipal water and sanitation strategy.

The strategy that has been developed includes lines of action and activities to advance the process of change, which focus on the following aspects:

- Adjust municipal management to Honduran regulations.
- Institutional agreements at the municipal level that promote sustainable management.
- Creation of a more favourable financial environment at the municipal level to implement improvements and expand water and sanitation services, allowing for environmental preservation.

The Municipality of Omoa has taken remarkable steps towards creating a sectoral governance environment. This change has been possible thanks to the commitment of a responsive and innovative municipal technical team, political decisions by the Municipality and the understanding of key actors from the private sector and Water Boards. The municipal strategy sets out how to assume these responsibilities by articulating consistent and coordinated actions over time to move beyond the current situation.

Keys to success

Prior to the elaboration of this document, interviews were conducted with local stakeholders in the Municipality of Omoa and representatives of the Municipality. Previously, water, sanitation and financial management had not been a priority for the municipality. However, a **change in mentality** has taken place and has been highlighted by the project, in which the beneficiaries are now focused on following up on the recommendations given to the Municipality of Omoa. In addition, they have socialised the issue of water and sanitation management with other local actors, allowing for accompaniment in the elaboration of the initial diagnosis, the opening of consultations, meetings and workshops.

“Nosotros tenemos un Municipio rico en naturaleza, belleza, historia, cultura, gastronomía, pero estamos cortos con los servicios básicos que deberían ser prioridad al ofrecer tanto al habitante que vive acá como el que nos visita [...]somos bendecidos en nuestra ubicación geográfica nos quedamos cortos, entonces desde ese punto de vista es un proyecto que es de suma importancia que nos ha cambiado la forma de pensar y que nos va ayudar en poder seguir creciendo acorde al desarrollo y el crecimiento que tienen otros destinos.” **Idania Brocato, Presidenta de Cámara de Turismo de Omoa**

“We have a municipality rich in nature, beauty, history, culture, gastronomy, but we are short of the basic services that should be a priority to offer both to the people who live here and to those who visit us [...] we are blessed in our geographical location but we fall short, so from that point of view it is a project that is of utmost importance that has changed our way of thinking

and that will help us to continue growing according to the development and growth that other destinations have". **Idania Brocato, President of the Omoa Chamber of Tourism**

Thanks to the project, **different sectors of civil society** that previously did not work together **have been brought together**. This has allowed them to get out of their comfort zone and focus on an important issue related to basic services in their municipality. Local actors have highlighted the **professionalism** with which the technicians have handled themselves, as well as the knowledge they have provided on the issues addressed. The activities carried out by the project have been transcendental for the local actors, so much so that they are willing to collaborate financially in the construction of the treatment plant. The community of Barrio La Playa and the businesses in the area are also willing to support the municipal authorities in the management of water and sanitation with other potential stakeholders.

"Todavía el año pasado teníamos cierta resistencia con los temas expuestos por el proyecto, para este año nos sentimos más comprometidos y organizados, nos ayudó el trabajo que se realizó en el proyecto[...] también se ha hecho un trabajo de socialización a la población en general y esto nos ayuda a plantear una gobernabilidad sostenible, en tener mayor interés, seguir presionando a nuestras autoridades, ahora que ya no tienen temor de mencionar sobre el cobro por tarifas y uso de contadores en las residencias y negocios sobre todo las que están frente al mar, esto también ha permitido que todos los sectores nos unamos por un bien común y de prioridad en nuestro Municipio" **Maribel de Umaña, Presidenta de Cámara de Comercio e Industria de Omoa**

"Last year we still had some resistance to the issues raised by the project, but this year we feel more committed and organised. [...] we have also done a socialisation work with the general population, and this helps us to propose a sustainable governance, to have more interest, to continue pressuring our authorities, now that they are no longer afraid to mention the collection of fees and use of meters in residences and businesses, especially those facing the sea, this has also allowed all sectors to unite for the common good and priority in our municipality." **Maribel de Umaña, President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Omoa**

The participation of women in the presidency of local organisations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Omoa, the Chamber of Tourism and the Patronato Barrio La Playa, demonstrates an important **women empowerment** in the region. This adds value, as having positions in the presidency allows them to push for the installation of water meters inside shops, restaurants and hotels, so that they are charged for the water consumed. This is one of the recommendations made by the project and demonstrates the positive impact it has had on local community decision-making.

The project has allowed for a complete diagnosis of the current situation of water and sanitation management in the Municipality of Omoa and has provided solutions to improve financial management and guarantee access to drinking water in an efficient manner in the Municipality. Thanks to the recommendations and studies carried out by the project, important measures have been taken in the field of **water governance**. One of the most important measures is the creation of the Municipal Water Resources Management Office, which will be operational as of March 2023. The hiring of a person responsible for the area is a significant step forward in ensuring more efficient and sustainable water management at the municipal level. This measure seeks to guarantee, in the long term, the population's access to drinking water and basic sanitation services.

"Cada Corporación en el pasar de los años ha hecho lo que ha podido con los recursos establecidos, ahora con la actual administración se ha socializado información valiosa que nos ha dejado el proyecto sobre el tema de sostenibilidad y la política de gestión del agua [...] estamos encaminados en mejorar nuestra gobernanza hídrica iniciando con la captación y potabilización del agua, adecuar los cobros al gasto realizado, queremos mejorar y llegar a tener nuestra planta de tratamiento." **Amilcar Fajardo, Director de Cámara de Turismo**

"Each Corporation over the years has done what it could with the resources established, now with the current administration valuable information has been socialised that the project has left us on the subject of sustainability and water management policy [...]. We are on the way to improving our water governance starting with the collection and purification of water, adapting the charges to the expenditure made, we want to improve and eventually have our treatment plant." **Amilcar Fajardo, Director of the Chamber of Tourism**

The lack of training increased the lack of knowledge on water management, sanitation and sustainability, but thanks to the training activities, local actors gained **new knowledge**, for example on tariff systems. All these inputs help them to continue working towards sustainability in new projects. The documents produced in component 2, such as the municipal water and sanitation strategy, are considered valuable tools for implementation by the Omoa Municipality and the Omoa Water Board.

“Eso ha fortalecido porque venimos de una pandemia, de estar desvinculados y a raíz de la participación del proyecto nos volvimos a organizar y estamos bien estructurados nuevamente [...] los documentos que fueron elaborados por el proyecto para nosotros van a ser fundamentales, ahora lo que sigue sobre el tema de agua y saneamiento, mejorar el sistema en el Municipio porque no contábamos con ello y yo estoy muy conforme con lo que se realizó, esperamos que al final se logren los objetivos.”

José Antonio Monge, Presidente de la Junta de la Asociación de Juntas Administradoras de Agua y Saneamiento del Municipio de Omoa, AJAASMO

“This has strengthened us because we came from a pandemic, from being disconnected, and as a result of the participation of the project we got organised again and we are well structured again [...] the documents that were produced by the project are going to be fundamental for us, now what follows on the subject of water and sanitation, improving the system in the municipality because we did not count on it and I am very satisfied with what was done, we hope that in the end the objectives will be achieved.” **José Antonio Monge, President of the Board of the Asociación de Juntas Administradoras de Agua y Saneamiento del Municipio de Omoa, AJAASMO**

It is important to highlight that the Municipality has become aware of the weaknesses in water and sanitation management in the Municipality of Omoa. This has led to the assumption of responsibilities and the generation of a **public commitment** through an Act of Commitment for Sustainability that was generated in the project. Significant progress has also been made by convening an open town hall meeting attended by all the Omoa Water Boards. This demonstrates a commitment on the part of the Municipality to work together with the Omoa Water Boards and the community to find solutions to the challenges present in the water and sanitation sector, all thanks to the actions implemented by the project.

Valuable Lessons from the Challenges

This section takes into consideration what was perceived by the actors interviewed for this document, leaving their contribution to be considered in future projects, being an opportunity for improvement according to the experiences felt.

It is necessary to carry out a **prior diagnosis of the site**, in order to identify the challenges, capacities and vulnerabilities, which will help to have an initial overview of the site to be intervened. The activities should be contextualised according to the needs and realities of the selected site.

It is essential that the formulation of the project be considered within the agreements made by the implementing agencies, executing agencies and the national counterpart, in order to facilitate the search for funding and dissemination for the implementation and continuity of the project in the future.

Establishing **clear communication channels**, defining the levels and roles of the actors involved, and structuring the organisation are key elements for effective management. In addition, it is important to establish with whom stakeholders should communicate at each stage of the project. This provides a clear understanding of the dynamics of each individual's role and avoids unnecessary confusion and disagreements.

“Las reuniones se dieron en su mayoría de forma bilateral, hasta el final pudimos estar todas las partes involucradas [...] agradecemos a GIZ por la gestión realizada, pero recomendaría que hagan que todos manejemos la misma información, así evitar confusiones con los demás y que expliquen cual es la atribución de cada uno en el proyecto. La falta de un representante de forma más permanente en Omoa hubiera facilitado las cosas y se pudo haber tomado mejor criterio de la situación y seguimiento de las actividades.” **Ángel Sorto, Coordinador Unidad de Gestión y Formulación de Proyectos de la Municipalidad de Omoa**

“The meetings were mostly bilateral, until the end we were able to attend all the parties involved [...]. We thank GIZ for the management, but I would recommend that they make sure that we all handle the same information, in order to avoid confusion with the others and that they explain what is the attribution of each one of us in the project. The presence of a more permanent representative in Omoa would have made things easier and it would have been possible to take a better view of the situation and follow up of the activities.” **Ángel Sorto, Coordinator of the Project Management and Formulation Unit of the Municipality of Omoa**

Keys for Sustainability

The project in the Municipality of Omoa is relevant for Honduras and in turn for the region, as it had a significant impact on the local population by improving their quality of life and increasing their knowledge of basic services such as drinking water and sanitation. Furthermore, the project has great potential for scaling up and could be replicated in other rural communities in Honduras. It could also generate interest and commitment from the international community to support similar projects in other Latin American countries facing similar challenges, so sustainability and success depends a lot on good planning, implementation and follow-up at the institutional level.

The role of the Municipality of Omoa is essential in having an active role in the sustainability of the actions carried out by GIZ, but also in the follow-up of the results once the project is finished. To this end, it is suggested to incorporate the actions derived from the project in the Municipal Annual Operational Plan and to strengthen the Municipal Office of Water Resources Management with trained personnel, logistical and financial support. In addition, establish alliances with strategic institutions (international organisations, governmental entities and private companies) and in the search for financing to develop adequate and efficient water and sanitation projects, which is essential to guarantee the health and wellbeing of the population.

It is crucial to establish a legal framework for the financial management of water services in order to ensure transparency and accountability. It is also necessary to involve local actors, such as beneficiaries and service providers, in decision-making and monitoring, which will strengthen its sustainability with the accompaniment of the community in water management. Promote the fulfilment of the agreements established in the commitment act by the Municipality and the local actors, in which the construction of a sanitary sewerage system in the area will be monitored in the future.

It is important that the next actions are carried out through inclusive processes, with technical assistance and taking into account the lessons learned for their dissemination. It is also necessary to continue promoting the replication of knowledge generated by GIZ technical assistance to local actors, involving the communities of the Municipality of Omoa in all processes and creating synergies between different actors.

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