Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational experience No. 13

Source: http://www.datuopinion.com/velez-santander

Accountability and the civil society

ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY

Accountability by public authorities in compliance with transparency protocols is often the result of the persevering pressure exerted by dynamic sectors of the civil society in a local context; is sometimes the only viable way to achieve quality in public services.

VÉLEZ 2039

Vélez is the capital city of the province of the same name, famous throughout Colombia for its guava jelly production and derivatives of other fruits. As head of the province which has 17 municipalities and approximately two hundred thousand inhabitants, it is an important center where several provincial public services have their headquarters. A short distance away is Barbosa, an urban municipality with an accelerated population growth due to its commercial dynamics. In 2010, in Vélez, the construction of a futuristic vision started, where the Civil Society could express its view about the city they wanted for the year 2039, date of the five hundred years anniversary of Vélez. This initiative, promoted by the Development Corporation of the Vélez Province, an NGO supported by Bread for the World, visualized both the dreams and the complaints of the general population. More than 500 different proposals and complaints were presented, provided by 1820 people (about 10% of the municipal population) about various issues, with emphasis on health care, drinking water supply and lack of recreational spaces. To follow up on this vision and help in its implementation, different civil society groups were formed, among them the group “Mesa Urbana” (the City Table)

Mesa Urbana at work.

The long wait at the Hospital

Urban agenda

The group “Mesa Urbana” prioritized for its work several issues: improvement in the service and health care of the Regional Hospital of Vélez, construction of the dam to improve the functioning of the drinking water system, and to maintain the headquarters of various provincial institutions (Legal Medicine, Family Welfare) in the city. The hospital counts as a referential healthcare establishment for the region with its several specialties. Many times, various interests and efforts sought the transfer of this role to the Barbosa hospital. Most of the complaints, resulting from public consultation, pointed to a lack of attention, a low-quality treatment by the staff and the lack of adequate equipment for a hospital of this level. About the water topic, the starting point was the insufficient supply of drinking water, where some sectors can only count with this service every 4 days. The regional government decided in 2010 to carry out a project of great magnitude to optimize the aqueduct of the municipality of Velez. A contract was signed with a construction company for the construction of a dam and other civil works. In 2015, 5 years later, despite the increase of the price, the dam has not been delivered yet.

Long-term monitoring

Custodia Castillo, Carmenza Ortiz and the sisters Elizabeth and Flor Ángela Villamil are some of the members of the Mesa Urbana. They said that their petitions found little echo in the authorities at the beginning and there were attempts to discredit the group, discredit their just claims with the argument that it was an opposing party group. After many letters addressed to the Mayor, the governor of Santander, the Secretary of Health, the Board of Directors of the Hospital and its manager, demanding a better quality in the service for the patients of the hospital, as well as reporting corrupt practices in the institution, the hospital´s manager was finally changed. Instead of improving, the quality of the service fell to such a level that medical staff was often lacking for the emergency section on the night shift.

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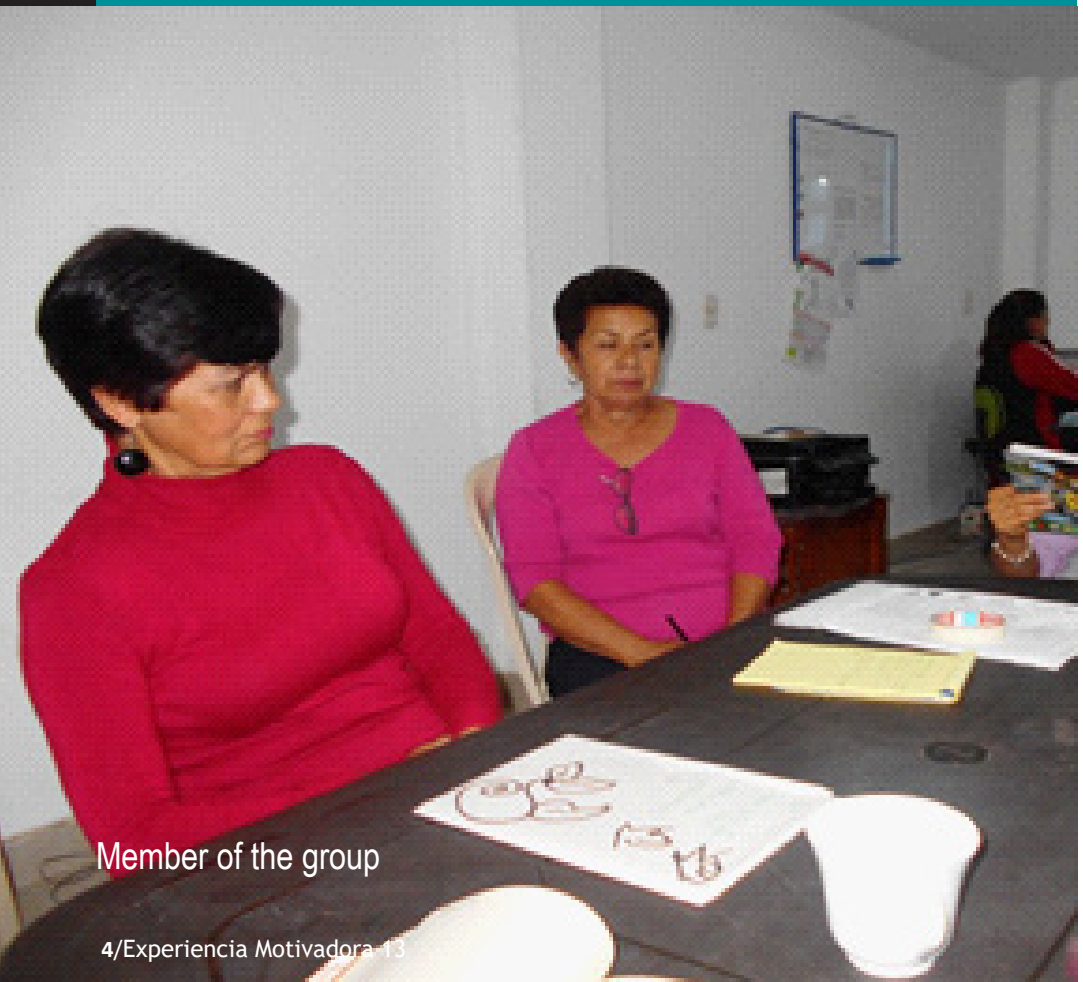

Member of the group

Given the passivity and indifference of the authorities to their constant demands, often supported by investigations and references within the regulatory framework, Mesa Urbana decided to change the strategy, going to regional and national legislative entities, as well as public sector supervision institutions. The process of electing the Hospital Users Committee, a binding requirement by law was annulled, as the group denounced various irregularities committed in the hospital´s administration. Finally, thanks to the insistence to the Departmental Assembly, Governorship and the Secretary of Departmental Health of Santander, the hospital´s directory board evaluated the efficiency of the hospital's management which opened the way for the change of the director. In order to achieve this first conclusive victory, the group worked hard for several years, reaching to public demonstrations in the Plaza de Bolivar and in front of the Superintendence of Health in the capital of the Republic with the slogan "hospital in critical care".

On the issue of the drinking water problematic and particularly the halfway project of the dam, letters had been addressed to the respective, mainly regional authorities. On more than one occasion, the members of Mesa Urbana moved to Bucaramanga, the regional capital, to engage in dialogue, at very tense times, with the technical staff responsible for the works supervision. For several months, marches were organized from Vélez to the construction site of the dam, monitoring the few to no progress of the work. The local government of Vélez, being the regulatory body responsible for the successful conclusion of the project, showed no greater interest in this process of social control. Finally, and the hard insistence of the Mesa Urbana, national control entities as the Comptroller and the General Attorney began an exhaustive investigation, after a week of inspection and investigation on the site, evidence of irregular costs for non-executed tasks was found.The mayor's office, instead of exercising social

control together with the civil society, preferred not to make any comment After the intervention by the authorities, the construction company restarted the work; which suffers constant delays and interruptions. The regional government is now under pressure to justify why over the years nothing was done against the breach of contract by the construction company. Mesa Urbana counts with the voluntary support of two engineers, helping in the continuous monitoring of the work. The new water storage facility is still not finished, but the corresponding governmental entities have already announced the opening date several times, which had to be postponed again. At the time of signing the contract, it was said that the project, with an initial investment of five billion pesos, which with all the additional amounts sums up a total of eight billion pesos (equivalent to four million dollars), had be delivered in a lapse of eight months. Four years have passed since then and if it had not been for the active role of the group, the water rationing in Vélez would continue indefinitely.

The process continues

At the beginning, few people in Velez thought that the claims of Mesa Urbana could have a real effect. The number of members of the group went down, even though the citizens always supported letters and petitions with their signatures, in addition to attending several actions of citizen mobilization.

The members, mainly women, feel that they have managed to win some victories even if not the complete battle. Hospital services have improved a little and in the subject of the dam the restart of the work was achieved, without knowing when, one day it will potable water will be available in

Dam of Vélez (Source: Gobernación de Santader)

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Panoramic view of Vélez (Source: http://www.visitevelez.travel.com)

Velez 24 hours a day

The current mayor, unlike her predecessors, has engaged in a more constructive dialogue with the civil society. The mayor's office recently helped 30 families who had become homeless through a landslide without the group having to act. These changes show that a greater interaction is slowly being achieved between the public administration and civil society. With this, neither the corruption nor the politicking in the local and regional political spheres has disappeared; but they are hopeful steps towards a culture of public institutions, more reliable and less reluctant.
None of the people at Mesa Urbana have considered entering into politics or aspire to assume any public office. They feel comfortable claiming, as citizens, greater transparency and accountability from the authorities.

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Messages to the future

- Be persistent, change does not come from one day to the next, but there must be a beginning.
- Consulting the citizens encourages participation and dialogue between the civil society and authorities.
- The diversity of ideas and creative actions help in the initiation of public debates and build pressure on authorities to remind them of their obligation with the common good.

The text, which is based on visits and discussions on site, was created by Jorge Krekeler (Misereor adviser), but initially made consensual with the people visited. Special thanks go to Juan Carlos González and the Corporación para el Desarrollo de la Provincia Vélez Team. For the contact thanks to Miguel Fajardo.

Almanac to the Future

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www.almanaquedelfuturo.wordpress.com
Original title “Rendir Cuentas”
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Edition: September 2016
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