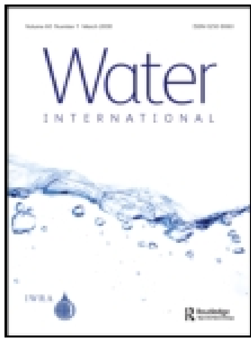

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Popular participation, equity, and co-production of water and sanitation services in Caracas, Venezuela

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This article argues that the technical water committees in Venezuela are an example of co-production of public service delivery between state and citizen. In practical terms, the committees help to reduce information asymmetries between service providers and citizen-users and improve accountability. Unlike depoliticized notions of co-production that have been celebrated in the mainstream development literature, however, this experiment in urban planning promotes participation as empowerment, because the committees are part of a wider political agenda, engage citizens in a broader process of social change, promote rethinking of the concept of citizenship, and have thus far avoided elite capture.

Keywords: participation; empowerment; equity; governance; co-production; decentralization

Introduction

The World Health Organization (2012) estimates that 780 million people still lack access to improved drinking water and 2.5 billion people have no access to improved sanitation. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2013) include an ambitious target for water and sanitation: to cut in half by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Public water utilities in developing countries are routinely criticized for failing to provide adequate water services to the poor. Indeed, the perceived failure of governments to provide 'water for all' is one of the reasons for the dramatic changes in urban water governance over the past two decades. Often large and inefficient, public water utilities struggle as institutions to remedy failed state-led planning models.

To date, much of the debate on improving equity in water-sector reforms has been polarized between assessing the merits of 'public' versus 'private' forms of delivery. This debate, however, has tended to obscure the principal problem in developing-country contexts: the systematic failure of water companies to connect the poorest of the poor, no matter who owns and operates them. Indeed, the barriers that limit poor people's access to water – such as poverty and political powerlessness – are likely to persist whether the provider is publicly or privately owned and operated. The formation of participatory institutions that include key stakeholders in the service-delivery process has therefore been promoted as a way to promote good governance and equity in the water and sanitation sector.

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This article discusses the impact of citizen participation in service delivery in the public water and sanitation utility in Caracas, Venezuela. In Caracas, 'technical water committees' (*mesas técnicas de agua*, or MTAs) emerged in marginalized neighbourhoods in the early 1990s to meet the needs of poor populations. Since the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, the process of establishing MTAs has been institutionalized and promoted at the national level. Despite the apparent success of the model, and the opportunities it presents for learning about 'best practices' in participation, the MTAs and other participatory initiatives in Venezuela have received little attention in the international development literature (Buxton, 2011).

This article argues that the MTAs in Venezuela represent a form of co-production that has sought to improve equity by empowering poor citizens. In practical terms, the MTAs help to reduce information asymmetries between service providers and citizen-users, and improve accountability. Unlike depoliticized notions of co-production that have been celebrated in the mainstream development literature, this article argues that citizens' participation in the MTAs creates the possibility of empowerment, because the committees engage citizens in a wider process of social change and promote a radical rethinking of the concept of citizenship.

The first part of the article reviews the mainstream literature on co-production in development sociology, outlining an alternative framework based on the insights of Hickey and Mohan (2005), who argue that empowerment initiatives must be part of a broader political project, change power relations, expand the notion of citizenship, and avoid elite capture. The second part of the article recounts the history of the MTAs and discusses their achievements based on Hickey and Mohan's criteria for empowerment. The conclusion discusses the productive tensions that emerge given the dialectical relationship between 'invited' (officially sanctioned) and 'invented' (autonomous, grassroots) spaces.

Co-production, participation and empowerment

Much of the mainstream development literature on co-production is built on the notion that civic action creates synergistic relationships between the state and civil society, in a process known as 'building social capital'. In a path-breaking symposium published in *World Development*, eminent development sociologist Evans (1996) claims that state–society synergy can be a catalyst for development in conditions where there is complementarity, simply defined as the "mutually supportive relations between public and private actors", and embeddedness, or "the ties that connect citizens and public officials across the public-private divide" (p. 1120).

Similar to 'social capital', the notion of co-production is conceptually ambiguous and used to refer to a wide range of institutional arrangements (Bovaird, 2007; Mitlin, 2008). Part of the theoretical ambiguity around the concept of co-production relates to the fact that it tends to be simply defined as an organizational form into which any ideological content can be poured. Ostrom's (1996) definition of co-production, for example – "the process through which inputs used to provide a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not in the same organization" (p. 1073) – includes anything from public–private partnerships between the state and multinational corporations to community wells managed by a community and a local non-governmental organization.

In the contemporary context of neoliberal austerity, the concept of co-production has been mobilized to justify shrinking public spending and the withdrawal of the state from guaranteeing the conditions of social citizenship. Neoliberal reforms have eroded peoples'

livelihoods and access to the most essential services, at the same time that they have opened up certain public realms of participation from which 'the poor' had been previously excluded (Miraftab, 2004; Molyneux, 2008). As Jaglin (2002) and Spronk (2009) observe, when coupled with the privatization of public services, participation is mobilized as a way to stabilize commercial relationships, as poor people find themselves volunteering to shovel ditches to shore up the profits of multinational water companies. Such co-production arrangements work to legitimate unequal power relations, not to change them.

The above analysis suggests that participation within co-production arrangements will not always lead to democratization and material improvements for the poor. Based on their critical review of participatory development initiatives, Hickey and Mohan (2005) identify four factors that increase the likelihood that participation will promote social transformation rather than maintain the status quo. First, participation must be part of a broader political project that seeks to challenge existing power relations, "rather than simply work around them for more technically efficient service delivery" (p. 250). Second, they argue that participatory approaches have the greatest potential to achieve social transformation where they aim not only to change power relations within the scope of development interventions, e.g. by changing power dynamics between planners and citizens, but also to address broader structures of oppression and envision more inclusive and sustainable development models. The third criterion, the pursuit of citizenship, involves not just bringing people into the political process but also democratizing these processes "in ways that progressively alter the 'immanent' processes of inclusion and exclusion that operate within particular political communities, and which govern the opportunities for individuals and groups to claim their rights to participation and resources" (p. 251). Lastly, attention needs to be paid to local power dynamics, particularly how participation may simply conceal the persistence of patronage relations that reinforce elite privilege. In short, participatory arrangements must avoid elite capture.

The authors clarify that not all of these conditions must be in place to make participatory initiatives worthwhile. Indeed, they suggest that political learning can take place in any form of participation. The following analysis, based on 19 semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted over 4 months in Antímano, a poor parish (a subdivision of the municipality) in western Caracas, suggests that the MTAs represent a case of empowerment, because they meet all 4 criteria.

The case study of Antímano has been chosen because the parish is home to a number of Venezuela's longest-running MTAs and because current and former staff of Hidrocapital, the state water utility for Caracas, identified Antimano's MTAs as an example of 'best practice' due to their high and sustained levels of participation.[1] Antímano has also been classified as the poorest parish in Caracas (Goldfrank, 2011, p. 113). A single case study was chosen to assess changes in service quality, relationships between the communities and state representatives, and community development. However, findings from this case may not be representative of all MTAs, and further comparative research across cases is clearly needed to shed more light on this innovative reform process.

The technical water committees in Caracas, Venezuela

Water service problems have long plagued Caracas, particularly the city's populous hillside *barrios* (low-income, informal settlements). Prior to 1999, government water service policy was highly discriminatory. It prioritized building networks in the formal neighbourhoods and within the formal city, and it privileged the high-income areas over

the middle-income areas (Cariola & Lacabana, n.d., p. 6). The result is the present situation of 'water apartheid': the upper- and middle-class areas, where the majority of the residents self-identify as 'white' according to the most recent census, benefit from high-quality services, while the lower-income areas, where most residents identify as 'mixed-race', develop informally in the absence of attention from the state.

The *barrios* grew due to progressive waves of rural–urban migration in the twentieth century. With the dawn of the petro-economy in the 1920s, wealth and employment opportunities became concentrated in urban areas, and the agricultural economy declined, which fueled migration to Venezuela's cities, particularly Caracas. New migrants settled all corners of the capital, often illegally building makeshift homes on public or privately owned land in marginal areas without access to urban services. Once their houses were established, residents mobilized to build clandestine connections to the urban water system, or eventually secured limited infrastructural improvements through public demonstrations or clientelistic ties with the party in power. The resultant piecemeal development of services constitutes what Bakker (2010, p. 22) describes as an 'archipelago': incomplete, fractured water and sanitation networks, and highly uneven service access within neighbourhoods.

The high altitude of the *barrios* makes delivering services in these areas particularly difficult. The city's average neighbourhood is at 800–1000 m above sea level – above its principal water reservoirs – and many *barrio* neighbourhoods are at much higher elevations. Considerable energy and an elaborate infrastructure are needed to pump water to households. For this reason, the Caracas aqueduct system is considered one of the most complex in the world.[2]

Neglected by water-utility and state officials, *barrio* residents' only recourse for poor services was public protest. To demand improvements, residents would deliver petitions, block main thoroughfares, occupy the offices of Hidrocapital, and even temporarily kidnap utility officials until they agreed to improve service delivery (Arconada, 2005a; Francisco, 2005; McCarthy, 2009). These water-related protests reached their peak during the early 1990s, prompting the newly elected, left-leaning mayor (1993–1996) of Caracas's Libertador Municipality, Aristóbulo Istúriz, and his team to seek innovative solutions to the water crisis. The water situation in the city had gone from bad to worse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Neoliberal reforms introduced during that period reduced public spending on services, which revealed the inequity of Venezuela's political system. From 1958 to 1993, the country had a 'pacted democracy' referred to as Punto Fijo, under which the electorate accepted the sharing of power between the three dominant political parties[3] with the promise of limited redistribution. Under neoliberalism, the political spoils-sharing continued; only social redistribution declined dramatically (Buxton, 2004).

The water sector was deeply affected by the corruption of Punto Fijo period. From 1974 onwards, the Instituto Nacional de Obras Sanitarias (INOS), at the time responsible for service planning, delivery, regulation and infrastructure, was plagued by clientelism and corruption, severely undermining the institute's ability to provide services. There were allegedly people on the payroll of the utility that did not actually work there but were rather political allies of the dominant parties (Francisco, 2005). This inefficiency, combined with decreased investment in services in the 1980s, led to a marked deterioration of urban services, and ultimately to the dismantling of INOS in 1989. In its place, the *hidrológicas* were created: a national water company, Hidroven, and its regional subsidiaries, including Hidrocapital, which provides water services for the capital region. That same year, there were over 500 recorded water protests in Venezuela, more than one a day (Francisco, 2005).

Santiago Arconada, a long-time labour organizer who also worked in the Istúriz and later the Chávez administration, reflects on the situation in his home parish of Antímano, a popular area in the west of the Libertador municipality: "When Aristóbulo's administration began in 1993, the water crisis was dire. We had water only once every two months! And during the times when we didn't have piped water, we had to wait in line to get water from tanker trucks. It was horrible."[4] Sewage ran freely in the streets.

Widespread discontent with the neoliberal reforms and the corruption of the Punto Fijo system eventually led to Hugo Chávez's electoral victory. However, before the left turn at the national level, the cracks in the Punto Fijo system were already manifest at the level of municipal politics. Reforms introduced in 1984 and 1989 mandated a degree of fiscal decentralization,[5] and in 1992 legislation passed that replaced centrally appointed regional officials with directly elected ones. This allowed for the election of mayors and governors not affiliated with the three dominant parties, including members of Aristóbulo Istúriz's left-leaning La Causa Radical party (Fernandes, 2010, p. 59). It also opened up political space for progressive local development initiatives. However, given their highly localized nature and limited financing, they were ill equipped to offset the devastating negative impacts of neoliberal reforms.[6]

The MTAs were among these local experiments. When Mayor Istúriz came to office in 1993, he assembled a "change team" of progressive reformers within his administration to address the water and sanitation problem and other pressing urban issues. Many members of the team had long histories of organizing in the *barrios*, student movements, unions, and other progressive organizations, and shared a strong commitment to people's participation. Together, they piloted a new model of participatory local governance called the 'parish government', which brought together local civil society, community members, and city councillors.

At a now famous parish meeting in Antímano on 6 March 1993, the idea for the MTAs was first conceived (Goldfrank, 2011). Together with progressive reformers within Hidrocapital, including Jacqueline Faría, then manager of the Caracas metropolitan water system, the municipality overcame national-government resistance and gained approval for the proposal.[7] With few resources, but a strong commitment to the project, the team implemented pilot water committees in two of Caracas's populous parishes: Antímano and El Valle.

The early initiatives were extremely successful in improving local services and encouraged unprecedented levels of community organization in the *barrios*, but the experiment was short-lived. In the 1995 elections, Istúriz lost to the right-wing candidate Antonio Ledezma. City officials, threatened by the reforms, quickly disbanded the MTAs and parish governments (Goldfrank, 2011). However, the early experience with the MTAs provided valuable lessons that would be taken up again after the election of Chávez in 1998. Indeed, Istúriz and several social movement activists who were part of his original change team would go on to play key roles in the Chávez administration.

When Hugo Chávez assumed office in 1999, the water crisis was one of his mandate's first political challenges. The electorate had huge expectations of the political outsider who had won a landslide victory on an anti-neoliberal social democratic platform. According to Santiago Arconada, "He rose to the occasion in such a forceful, convincing way that in the first few years the water experience was really the face of the Bolivarian Process."[8]

In March and April of his first year in office, Chávez appointed a new leadership team for the water sector. Jacqueline Faría[9] was appointed president of Hidrocapital. Faría, "an engineer by education and an activist by vocation", had first-hand experience with the

MTAs from her tenure in Hidrocapital during the Istúriz administration (McCarthy, 2009, pp. 10–11). Fellow progressives Cristobal Francisco Ortiz and Alejandro Hitcher Marvaldi were appointed vice-president of Hidrocapital and president of Hidroven, respectively (Arconada, 2005b). All three had sharpened their political teeth in student movements in the 1980s (Perfil biográfico de Alejandro Hitcher, 2010).

From 15 to 30 May 1999, the new leadership convoked a workshop of long-time social activists to discuss what became known as the 'communal management' of Hidrocapital. Delegates came from a variety of backgrounds and included trade unionists, students, environmentalists, cooperative activists, academics, and members of different neighbourhood and cultural groups. The MTA experience under Istúriz figured centrally in the workshop discussions, and many elements of that experience were ultimately adopted. In 1999–2000, Hidrocapital implemented a variation on the MTA model throughout the capital region (Arconada, 2005b).

The first step in creating a people-centred water service was to establish Hidrocapital's community management office, which serves as the main point of contact between communities and the utility (McCarthy, 2009, p. 11). In its first two years, the MTA model proved itself unequivocally in Caracas. When two disasters hit the capital – the Vargas landslide[10] and the collapse of the El Guapo River Dam, which left parts of the capital without water for days – the organizations helped ensure that people could access water during the crises. And they were gaining national recognition for their achievements. By 2001, thanks to success at the local level, MTAs became national public policy (Lacabana et al., 2007). Today, there are an estimated 9000 MTAs nationwide;[11] as of 2011, the MTAs had initiated 1500 community-managed infrastructure projects (Mesas Tecnicas de Agua, 2011).

MTAs as part of a broader political project

There is little doubt that Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution (or *el proceso* as it is known in local terms) is one of the most radical experiments of the New Left in Latin America, and that as such the MTAs are part of a broader process of political change. What is less well known is that the MTAs and many of the other participatory initiatives promoted by the Chávez government, such as the communal councils,[12] were actually inspired by earlier models that predated Chávez by at least a decade. In this sense, the Bolivarian process is not a simple 'top-down' project but rather a dialectical process in which the state responds to local struggles and initiatives that emerge outside of the official channels of the state or at local levels of government. These grass-roots initiatives are then 'scaled up' and institutionalized at the state level.

Since the beginning of the process, Venezuela has seen many concrete gains in terms of advances in health, education and housing, thanks to a massive increase in social investments funded by the country's vast oil wealth. From 1998 to 2006, social spending as a percentage of GDP increased from 8.2% to 20.8% (Griffiths, 2010, p. 614). As a result of social spending and the state provision of welfare through the various missions of the Bolivarian Revolution, numerous quality-of-life indicators have also improved. According to Wilpert (2005), "infant mortality ... dropped from 18.8 per thousand to 17.2 per thousand between 1998 and 2002, and life expectancy ... increased from 72.8 to 73.7 years in the same period" (p. 20). Between 2002 and 2005, poverty and extreme-poverty rates in Venezuela decreased by 18.4 and 12.3 per cent, respectively, which was "the second sharpest decline in the continent" (Ellner, 2010, p. 90). More recent figures indicate that the percentage of Venezuelans living below the poverty line fell from 49.4%

in 1999 to 27.6% in 2008 and that inequality seems to have been reduced by as much as 18% in the same period (Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2011, p. 10).

These impressive accomplishments can be attributed partly to participatory local projects in which thousands of citizens have participated. In the aftermath of the devastating bosses' strike in 2002–2003, Chávez announced seven 'missions' aimed at delivering health, education and food to ordinary people, with the active participation of the citizenry. This represents a radical change from the way that social programmes have traditionally been delivered in the country (Hawkins et al., 2011; Mahmood et al., 2012).

Like these other programmes, the MTAs have been accompanied by a dramatic increase in state spending, which distinguishes them from neoliberal forms of co-production in which citizen participation compensates for declining public investment in water and sanitation. According to Ministry of Environment statistics, the government has invested an average of USD 600 million per year in improving services since Chávez's election in 1998 ("Estado venezolano", 2011), meaning that Venezuela has one of the highest per capita investment levels in water and sanitation in Latin America. Between 2001 and 2011, it is estimated that the government invested a total of USD 7.518 billion in water and sanitation, compared with only USD 2.4 billion between 1989 and 1998 (Castillo, 2011) – a threefold increase. Between 2010 and 2012, special funds invested in the water and sanitation sector totalled close to USD 2.718 billion, of which USD 1.18 billion was related to sanitation (Interamerican Development Bank, 2012, p. 4).

Changing power relations between state and citizen

The MTAs represent a co-production arrangement between the state and citizens that is part of a broader process of changing state–society relations. A key element of the model is its attempts to bridge the divide between 'development experts' and community members by mobilizing knowledge for both technical and political ends. This approach to grass-roots co-production draws on local expertise, not just as a means for collecting technical information but also as a way to raise the political capacity of the poor to make claims on the state. As Diana Mitlin (2008) observes, more attention needs to be "given to co-production as a political process that citizens engage with to secure changes in their relations with government and state agencies, in addition to improvements in basic services" (p. 352). In her work on 'bottom-up', grass-roots co-production arrangements amongst shack dwellers in Pakistan, Namibia, South Africa and India, Mitlin (2008) explores how social movements have used co-production as a means to advance access to services and goods that meet basic needs, and also to change the role of citizens in relation to the state programmes. Mitlin goes beyond the instrumental focus of the co-production literature to emphasize how these experiences have helped build the political capacity of poor people's movements to make claims on the state, but also to go beyond it. In what she calls "grassroots co-production", local social-movement organizations involved in advocacy over housing rights challenge the notion that the only legitimate agents for the planning and construction of infrastructure are state agencies.

As in the housing projects analyzed by Mitlin, citizen participation in the MTAs serves both an instrumental and political function. Since the water system is so complex, Hidrocapital does not have the capacity to provide adequate services in the *barrios* without information from users. Inspired by the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' approach of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the MTA methodology is also a political strategy for breaking down the intellectual division of labour between those who plan and make decisions (the bureaucrats and technocrats) and those who carry out community work.

To form an MTA, a community must follow a participatory three-step methodology with support from the utility: (1) census; (2) plan or sketch; and (3) diagnosis. Through the census*,* community members collect data on who lives in their neighbourhood and the status of their services. The plan or sketch is a map of the community. The map is important because the utility needs to know where the communities have laid their pipes; however, the exercise is also a symbolic way for communities to assert their right to the city. Arconada recalls that under the administration of Istúriz, the *barrios* of Antímano (home to over 150,000 people) did not even appear on Caracas city maps.[13] The map is a way of putting communities in 'the plans', assigning themselves importance in political priorities. The mapping process also serves as a way of building a collective memory of the community and its history. The third and final step is a diagnosis of the service deficiencies. In cooperation with the utility, the communities identify problems and plan solutions, often through community-managed infrastructure projects.

The most significant formal channel through which MTAs may influence government policy and planning is the community water council (*consejo comunitario de agua,* or CCA). At regularly scheduled CCA meetings, representatives from the technical water committees that share the same water distribution system (or from the same parish, depending on its size) come together with water utility staff to discuss service issues. The council has three main functions: to prioritize issues from identified needs; to organize solutions and create work plans; and to follow up on work. The monitoring function is crucial because the council acts as a form of "social control" over the water company (Arconada, 2005a, p. 134). According to Arconada, the oversight led to immediate changes in the way the water utility worked, because it was required for the first time to document its work in a way that was presentable to the public (2005b, p. 195).

The biggest achievement of information sharing through the MTAs has been in managing water distribution in areas where piped water is delivered to households in rotation. In elevated parishes such as Antímano, there is insufficient pressure to pump water to all sectors (neighbourhoods) simultaneously, so most sectors receive water only periodically. Before, communities rarely knew when the water would arrive. It would often come in the middle of the night, and residents would have to sacrifice sleep to fill up their water tanks.[14] They would also risk missing the opportunity to store water if they were not vigilant (McCarthy, 2010). Now, the engineers work with the community to deliver water according to a predetermined schedule, so that communities can better plan their water storage. The utility directs water according to an elaborate system of valves, and there is continuous follow-up through CCA meetings, phone calls and household visits to verify that water is arriving on time. Given the complexity of the system, the utility would never be able to know whether water was arriving at certain blocks without this cooperation. The government eventually envisions transferring the entire management of the local water cycle to the communities themselves, including the operation of the valves.[15]

Through these practices, the MTAs are challenging the distinction between community and expert knowledge. Indeed, the term 'technical' was deliberately added to the name of the water committees to build the communities' confidence in their ability to make decisions about water service, rather than deferring to 'specialists' (McCarthy, 2009, p. 12). When engineers visit neighbourhoods, residents emerge from their homes to explain to the engineers how their water system works. In CCA meetings, it is not uncommon for community members to contradict an engineer's proposals, explaining to them why a certain proposed solution would not work.

This close cooperation represents a radical departure from Hidrocapital's previous practices. As Victor Díaz, a community coordinator for Hidrocapital, explains, the utility staff previously never set foot in the *barrios* but "planned everything from air-conditioned offices".[16] Manuel González, another member of the early reform team in Hidrocapital, refers to the shift as a transition from a 'technical' logic to a 'social' logic (cited in Lacabana et al., 2007). This new logic means using creativity to find solutions that do not always conform to conventional engineering practices. Initially, these changes were met with considerable resistance within the utility. As Arconada explains, engineers would frequently complain that they didn't study engineering to "talk to poor people in the *barrios* at 8 o'clock at night".[17] Today, the model has been institutionalized, and most engineers recognize the importance of participation for improving services. However, questions remain about how far the MTA participants have been empowered to advance their broader strategic objectives.

Promoting a new form of citizenship

Florencia Gutiérrez, a long-time MTA *vocera* (spokesperson)[18] and a 67-year-old grandmother from Antímano's largest *barrio*, Santa Ana, swells with pride as she points out improvements in the parish of Antímano. From sewer pipes and storm drains to subsidized food distributors and community health centres, community members themselves led all of the work, through the communal councils and communes. "We are building an *urbanismo*", she explains.[19] By *urbanismo*, she means a dignified urban space, in contrast with a *barrio*. While *barrio* is often used as a derogatory term, an *urbanismo* is a source of pride. It also implies self-sufficiency: that goods and services are produced and distributed locally. Through the MTAs, communal councils, and communes, community activists are actively shaping the urban development process and redefining what it means to be a *barrio* resident. In doing so, they are advancing a vision of citizenship based on the notion of 'popular power'.

The form of co-production expressed in the MTAs challenges the liberal notion of citizenship in which citizens enter into a 'social contract' with the state, under which they agree to be ruled in exchange for certain privileges (or 'rights') and protections (Rousseau, 1987, cited in Purcell, 2003, p. 565). Under this vision, citizens' input into state decisions is usually institutionalized through an electoral system, which establishes delegation as the organizing principle of democracy (Motta, 2011, p. 35). The liberal view of universal citizenship overlooks the conditions of 'partial citizenship' that have long been the reality for the majority of citizens in Venezuela, as formal political equality masks underlying inequalities in the economic realm.

The notion of *poder popular* ('popular' or 'public' power) advanced through the MTAs represents a reinterpretation of citizenship that goes beyond 'inclusion' towards addressing processes of uneven development. This vision of popular power views social exclusion as a structural rather than individual problem and seeks to redress exclusion through the redistribution of power and resources. The Venezuelan government has therefore granted greater weight to marginal areas in its promotion of social programmes and participatory organizations. According to Smilde (2011), this reorientation has resulted in a "change in citizenship as formerly marginalized sectors of society become the central focus of the government and are receiving full benefits of modern citizenship" (p. 22).

Women have been particular beneficiaries of the participatory initiatives at the local level, and the main protagonists in the MTAs. Allen et al. (2006) argue that women's

leadership within the MTAs has been responsible for substantial achievements, and that their participation has "created a change in the way the peri-urban poor perceive their reality, creating a positive attitude towards new forms of social inclusion and hope for improvements in livelihoods" (p. 77). On average, 75% of all MTA participants are women (Allen et al., 2006; Lacabana, 2008; McCarthy, 2012), and in Antímano the rate of female participation is slightly higher, at 80%.[20] The vast majority of these participants are mothers and grandmothers from various socio-economic backgrounds, although the youngest active member interviewed for this study was 16 years old.

MTAs and elite capture

Finally, it is important to recognize that communities are not always harmonious spaces. Community organizing is inevitably fraught with interpersonal conflict and struggles for power (see also Bakker, 2008, 2010), which means that participatory arrangements are subject to elite capture. MTA *voceras* lamented that in some sectors, a small group of people take over the communal council for their own gain. For example, they cited cases where lead *voceras/voceros* were hoarding funds and distributing resources such as housing and scholarships to their own families and friends, without consulting the rest of the community through neighbourhood assemblies (as required by law). These abuses were allegedly facilitated because members of the same family controlled the communal councils' Community Administration and Finance and Social Accountability Units, in contravention of the Organic Law on Communal Councils. In some cases, one *vocera* would take control of official documents or the communal council seal, which is necessary for all correspondence with state institutions, and withhold them from rest of the community members.[21]

These types of abuses differ from more conventional forms of elite capture, because these community organizers are not political or economic elites. However, there is concern that some *barrio* residents may be better equipped than others to assume leadership positions in the communal organizations and may therefore be able to manipulate the processes for their own ends. Acting as a spokesperson is a major time commitment, which may be out of reach for people who have full-time employment or young children. Moreover, it requires levels of literacy and skills in financial planning, which not all residents have. However, the capacity building and literacy efforts implemented by the education and health missions may help mitigate the risks of exclusion and elite capture in the long term.

Elite capture may also be less of a problem in the MTAs compared with housing projects or scholarship programmes because water infrastructure improvements are generally designed for an entire neighbourhood. Moreover, all community projects must be approved by majority vote, in an assembly open to all neighbourhood residents over 15 years of age, with a minimum quorum of 20% of all residents (Ley Orgánica de los Consejos Comunales, 2006, p. 20), and the communal councils are held to strict reporting requirements by government agencies. In reality, given the prevalence of internal community conflict and jealousies, it is also possible that many of the claims of corruption are exaggerated (a point also raised by Lacabana et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, longer-term ethnographic research is needed to ascertain whether participation has facilitated an inequitable distribution of resources within neighbourhoods. This is especially true given that pre-existing asset distributions and related power inequities may be less visible in urban areas due to people's involvement in the informal economy and their control over 'hidden' resources (Marcus & Asmorowati, 2006).

A related question is the extent to which the MTAs depart from traditional forms of political clientelism. For liberal analysts of the process, the Chávez government's mobilizing and channelling resources to its base represents a mere continuation of the clientelist relations of Punto Fijo. They understand the revolutionary parties' electoral victories through the lens of clientelism, arguing that the government buys votes through the social missions (see e.g. Corrales & Penfold-Becerra, 2007). While it is true that mission and MTA participants – like the majority of Venezuela's poor and marginalized citizens – are predominantly supporters of the process, explaining government support in terms of 'buying votes' is far too simplistic.

People's commitment to the Bolivarian Process and their participation in the popular organizations is motivated not just by material rewards but also by an increased sense of dignity and self-esteem and a strong identification with Chávez and the broader political project (Fernandes, 2010). In addition, the concerted efforts to promote participation, community organization, and political consciousness-raising discussed above distinguish the MTAs and other social organizations from past examples of political gift-giving meant to guarantee political subordination (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, p. 130). The demands on community activists' time alone belie claims that the Chávez government is giving 'handouts'.

Moreover, even observers (such as Michael McCarthy) who are critical of the politicization of the MTAs acknowledge that although there may be isolated instances of favouritism in the distribution of funds to communal councils and other organizations, "membership in the PSUV [Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, Chávez's party] is not a widely applied prerequisite for participating in or forming a council or for a constituted council to generate effective participation in its relationship with the state" (McCarthy, 2012, p. 139). Hawkins et al. (2011, p. 211) confirm this finding in their study of the government's social missions.

Nonetheless, it is possible that the increasingly overt partisan politicization of the MTAs will lead some low-income opposition members to self-exclude (Hawkins et al., 2011, p. 211; interview with Santiago Arconada, 24 August 2012). More systematic comparative research on the MTAs as they continue to evolve will help determine whether the MTAs continue to deepen democracy or revert to past patterns of political clientelism.

Conclusion: Tensions that emerge between 'invited' and 'invented' spaces

This article has argued that while the MTAs in Venezuela have not resolved the water problems in Caracas, they have significantly improved equity in service delivery. More importantly, rather than narrowly harnessing the participation of the poor in one-off, isolated initiatives, the MTAs represent a form of co-production that not only helps to deliver the 'material emblems of citizenship' but has enhanced the political and organizational capacity of citizens to push for citizenship rights, thus transforming power relations.

Co-production initiatives such as the ones in Caracas rest on a productive tension that emerges between 'invited' and 'invented' spaces for building popular power, highlighting the dialectical nature of the process of transformation in Venezuela. Faranak Miraftab (2004) emphasizes the importance of maintaining 'invited' spaces – defined as spaces "occupied by those grassroots and their allied non-governmental organizations that are legitimized by donors and government interventions" (p. 1) – in order to meet the practical needs of poor citizens for food, shelter and basic sanitation. However, the 'invented spaces', defined as those that are "occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action" (p. 1), are equally important for maintaining the independent

capacity of the community to push for structural change, for it is in these spaces that citizens directly confront the authorities and the status quo.

The creation of new institutionalized relationships between the utility and the communities represents a major improvement in one key respect: communities no longer have to protest for their water services. But many participants and social movement activists in Venezuela raise concerns that within these 'invited spaces', the community organizations are becoming increasingly bureaucratized, which limits experimentation and creativity by forcing community organizations to organize within only official, state-sanctioned channels. MTA participants fear that increased rigidity may ultimately slow the transformative process.

Action in autonomous spaces is also important because it is unclear whether the MTAs would outlast a change in political administration, particularly at the national level. Victor Díaz raised this point at a CCA meeting in Antímano just days after Chávez's electoral victory in the 7 October 2012 presidential elections. While Chávez's victory would have been considered a landslide in the US or Canada, it was his closest margin – nearly 11%. The election of Nicolás Maduro, following Chávez´s death in March 2013, was even narrower (just 1.5%). Many attribute the increasingly close margins to the problems of bureaucracy and inefficiency described above. At the meeting, Díaz, himself an Antímano resident and long-time social activist, acknowledged that the work on water and sanitation had not been fast enough, and admonished participants to continue to put pressure on the government. "I want to pressure the water utility further, but I can't do it alone." He also encouraged the committees to be more autonomous. "I wouldn't be here if the opposition had won; they would send new civil servants." Carmen Rojas summed up the central dilemma created by 'invited spaces' for fostering popular power: "No one is just going to give us popular power. We need to take it ourselves."

Notes

1. Interviews with Victor Díaz, current coordinator of Hidrocapital's Community Management Office and community promoter for Antímano, 20 August 2012; and Santiago Arconada, long-time water activist and first coordinator of Hidrocapital's Community Management Office, 24 August 2012.
2. Interview with Hidrocapital community promoters, 28 August 2012. (Community promoters are utility staff people who act as liaisons between the neighbourhood MTAs and the water company.)
3. The parties to the Punto Fijo pact were: Acción Demócratica (AD, Democratic Action); the Christian-democratic Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI, Committee of Independent Political Organization); and the small, leftist Unión Republicana Democrática (URD, Democratic Republican Union). The primary goal of the agreement was to share power and resources among these three parties while excluding challengers, primarily the Communist Party of Venezuela (Wilpert, 2006, p. 12).
4. Interview with Santiago Arconada, 24 August 2012.
5. As Fernandes (2010, pp. 58–59) describes, the outcomes of decentralization were contradictory. On the one hand, decentralization was part of broader neoliberal measures promoting fiscal austerity and also led to the concentration of resources in wealthier municipalities, exacerbating uneven urban development. On the other hand, decentralization allowed for the emergence of new power bases outside of the country's traditional corporatist structures, which promoted greater diversity in political-party activity and also encouraged social-movement organizing outside of clientelist networks.
6. By the late 1990s, poverty had reached astronomical levels. At the end of 1996, 86% of the Venezuelan population was poor, and 65% lived in extreme poverty (Buxton, 2004, p. 122).
7. Interview with Victor Díaz, Hidrocapital community coordinator, 20 August 2012.
8. Interview with Santiago Arconada, 24 August 2012.

9. At the time, Faría was a member of the Patria Para Todos party, a splinter group of La Causa Radical, which also promoted participatory forms of democracy.
10. The tragedy struck December 16, 1999, in the coastal state of Vargas. Over the course of three days, torrential rains, floods and landslides killed tens of thousands of people, destroyed thousands of homes and completely disrupted the state's infrastructure, including the water service.
11. Interview with Victor Diaz, 20 August 2012.
12. Communal councils are elected neighbourhood planning bodies that identify and prioritize community needs and execute community development projects. With the adoption of the 2006 Organic Law on Communal Councils, the MTAs were subsumed under the communal councils as a working group. It is the communal councils that receive and manage the finances for MTA-led water and sanitation projects. Enshrined in law in 2009, the communes bring together all of the communal councils in a given geographic area to better coordinate projects and initiatives, including the development of the social economy.
13. Interview with Santiago Arconada, 24 August 2012.
14. Focus group with Antímano MTA spokeswomen, 22 November 2012. Lacabana and Cariola (2005) also make similar observations.
15. Interview with Hidrocapital community promoters, 28 August 2012. According to the promoters, in some cases the community members already change the valves; however, in Antímano and most other parishes the operations engineers manage the pumps and valves. These engineers work for a private company, Empresa Carrillo, under contract with Hidrocapital. According to Hidrocapital promoter Dircia García, having the communities manage the valves would be a source of local employment (since the utility would pay them), and safer. Security is a perennial concern in the *barrios*, and outsiders are often at greatest risk.
16. Interview with Victor Díaz, 20 August 2012.
17. Interview with Santiago Arconada, 24 August 2012.
18. Spokespeople (*voceros/voceras*) are elected representatives of neighbourhood MTAs. The term 'spokesperson' is used instead of terms such as 'president' or 'leader' in view of the preference for more horizontal organizational structures.
19. Personal communication with MTA spokesperson Florencia Gutiérrez, 28 October 2012.
20. Interview with Victor Díaz, 4 December 2012.
21. Personal communication with *voceras* during a tour of Carapita, 2 October 2012; interview with MTA *vocera* Sulay Morales, 11 November 2012.

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