

Field visit to Champa-Hospital Rural Water Supply Cooperative

14 February 2008

GWA participants: Daniela Nogueira; Zelina Ibrahim; Marcia Brewster; Carmen Rojas; Doris Benavides; Linnette Vassell; and Gwendolyn Ledger Hermosilla, interpreter.

Champa-Hospital Cooperative participants: General Manager, Jemimah Santander Torres; President of the Board, Manuel Morán Olmos; Directors: Raul Riveros Cabrales, Segundo Espinoza, Ricardo Garriga and Elias Leyton Aliaga; Consultant Engineer, Nelson Bravo; Member from the Oversight Committee Zoila Garrido Armigo.

Participants to the GWA Training Workshop were warmly welcomed to the Agua Potable Rural (APR) Hospital-Champa Ltda. Cooperative, located about 50 kilometres south of Santiago, Chile. They were welcomed by the dynamic manager, Ms. Jemimah Santander Torres, who is a member of GWA, and the President of the Board of Directors, Mr. Manuel Morán Olmos, as well as the consultant engineer, other Directors of the Board, a member of the Oversight Committee and staff members of the Cooperative. GWA participants took note that all seven members of the Board are men, while four out of five members of the Oversight Committee were women (the president being the man).

The group started off by visiting the three water installations – two in Champa and one in Hospital. The installations consist of a large water tank, groundwater pumping and distribution systems. We saw the chlorination pumps and the water quality monitoring systems. All the installations were immaculately clean and very well functioning. The engineer says there is never a shortage of water. The first tank supplies 380 families; the second (very large) water tank serves 980 families; and the one at Hospital serves 180 families. Full piping systems for household access are a part of the project. The cost of the largest tank and distribution system was approximately \$ 500 million (Chilean pesos) or about US\$ 1,000,000. This covered the 25 m. high tank, the pipelines for distribution, wells and pumps. The tank holds 500 m³ of water, and the pump yields 80 litres/second. The water is generally meant for domestic use, while surface water streams from the mountains are used for irrigation of fruit orchards (plums, peaches, oranges) and growing corn. There is about a 20 % loss of water in the distribution system.

Hospital gets its name as it was the location of an important hospital for treating the wounded during the war of independence from Spain in 1818. Its water system now supplies 180 families, and it plans to extend distribution to another 100 families in the near future.

While all these systems were initially planned for a 20-year growth period, expansion will be needed sooner (10 years) because so many people want to live in a place with a good water system. The initial finance for the systems came from the InterAmerican Development Bank, which was promoting rural water supply and sanitation systems in the 1980s throughout Latin America. Altogether there are 1500 of these rural water systems in Chile, according to the Ministry of Public Works. The tariff averages about

US\$9/month per household for 15 m³ of water. The government provides a social subsidy for poor people living in the Cooperative area. The subsidy of about 50% goes directly to the Cooperative, and the family is charged that much less for its water.

Following the visit to the installations, we went back to a very nice meeting room for a briefing by Jemimah (the manager) and members of the Board. Jemimah explained the creation of two separate water Cooperatives back in 1968 – Champa and Hospital. The two groups merged into the APR Hospital-Champa Ltda in the year 2000. The current structure includes a General Assembly of 1400 members (households). The General Assembly elects the Board members and, since 90 % of the members are men, all the members of the Board are men. Jemimah, as Manager, also sits on the Board, but she is not elected. Members of the Oversight Committee (four women and one man) are also elected; they are concerned with day-to-day operation and billing. They get paid a small amount for this service.

The manager noted that she got the job by accident, when her father was president of the cooperative and the former manager got sick. She started as a volunteer and then the leaders felt that she was doing a good job and asked her to take the job for billing. Her father had to resign as president. The cooperative was not in good condition at the time – it had no office, it was burdened with debt, and there was no instruction manual about how to take care of the administrative tasks. Jemimah had only attended secondary school, so she only reluctantly took this difficult job. She took up the challenge, and started to organize the office, the tasks, the Board of Directors, the general meetings for members and the accounts. She also got training in accounting and auditing, which enabled her to take the job as manager. The cooperative started growing and increased from 350 households to 531 by 1988. The merger with Champa was not easy, but it has improved all aspects of the Cooperative. Now they have 1400 households as members. She has received a lot of recognition for all the innovations since that time. The Cooperative is now a model among its peers. It is successful financially and administratively, and has been recognized at the national and international level.

Following her interesting presentation, a member of the Board from Hospital noted that the Cooperativa was over 30 years old. He had seen how it started from scratch and had watched it grow, build infrastructure and prosper. He was very proud of how strong the society is now. He said that the initial group had 74 members, and that the government had provided the technology, while the members put in their labour, digging holes and putting in the distribution system. At the beginning there were no meters, so every member paid the same. Now everyone has a meter so they pay according to use. His opinion was that the reason women were not elected to the board was because they did not run for election. He felt that more women will be elected in the future.

A member of the Board from Champa noted how difficult the merger had been, and that there was a lot of fighting at the time. He said that they had all been poor tenant farmers working for big landowners. They learned a lot from the merger -- the Department of Cooperatives had helped them a lot and made them strong. He said that one reason that the merger had worked so well was that they have always focused on the technical

aspects of water and not on political matters. Another member from Hospital added that they all work together for the same goal, and that it was a great experience being on the board. He also said that the General Assembly was happy with their work and that the technical people they worked with were very good.

We also heard from Sra. Garrido of the Oversight Committee, who told about her job of ensuring that proper accounts were kept and that the day-to-day operation of the Cooperative runs smoothly. She had had training in various technical subjects, including auditing.

Following a round of questions (our interpreter was Gwendolyn from Maria Angelica Alegria's office), the group took us outside to a wonderful luncheon of traditional Chilean food, including pastel de choclo (corn and meat casserole) and humitas (a corn and vegetable dish wrapped in leaves). They also served fruits and juices, and it was a lovely setting. We were entertained by a very professional couple who played and sang traditional music. We were all reluctant to leave, especially when they showered us with gifts and friendship. Doris gave a lovely thank-you speech followed by each of the rest of us. We will remember this group and their excellent work with fondness.

Following the visit to the cooperative, we continued on to the village of Pomaire, where we saw handicrafts and artisanal products, in particular pottery. The GWA participants did a great job of pushing the van down the main street of town because of a dead battery. Altogether it was an informative and enjoyable excursion.

*Marcia Brewster
28 February 2008*