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#8 CASE STUDY: CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT – URUGUAY.

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1. Introduction

This case study is about the capacity development in the local government administration of the second county in Uruguay.

Uruguay is located between Argentina and Brazil in South America. It is a middle-income country with 3 million inhabitants. Uruguay is divided into 19 councils. Montevideo is the national capital and Canelones is the second county in importance because it belongs to the metropolitan area and has the two biggest cities after the national capital. Canelones has 480,000 inhabitants and the main economic sectors are tourism based on the 100 km of sea coast, horticulture and wine production. With its seaside resorts, horticultural areas and vineyards, small towns and big satellite cities, Canelones has a diversity of situations that presents a challenge in solid waste management (SWM).

The Department of Environmental Management of the local government administration (Intendencia Municipal de Canelones) is responsible for SWM and this is the main issue that it wishes to improve. This is the reason why the current administration increased the staff by recruiting young professionals.

The management of infectious medical waste is regulated by the Environmental Ministry and as yet there are no regulations for hazardous industrial waste. There is some supervision of hazardous waste management, but there are few satisfactory means of treatment and disposal, such as recycling of some hazardous materials and incineration in an industrial plant. The construction of a special landfill for hazardous waste is scheduled for next year. The non-hazardous industrial waste of the county is usually disposed of in municipal sites.

Before the present government came to power, the management of waste in Canelones was limited to the collection of waste from the streets and disposal in open dumps.

The two main improvements that have been carried out in recent years are in regard to disposal and recycling. The disposal sites have been improved and a new sanitary landfill is expected to be ready next year. In Uruguay, only one council has a sanitary landfill, because of the high cost of this method of waste disposal.

Canelones launched two recycling programmes: one for household waste and the other for non-hazardous industrial waste. These programmes improved the quality of life of 80 waste pickers. The recycling programme for household waste is partly financed by the Chamber of Industries, under a national law that requires support for packaging recovery programmes.

The Department of Environmental Management of the local government of Canelones was created in 1998 and it had departments for parks and the zoo and for urban hygiene. The operations staff were managed by six regional managers and the professional staff consisted of an engineer. The current administration has upgraded the Department of Environmental Management during the last three years. Today there is better planning, coordination of the workforce is more efficient and new sections have been created. Currently there are offices in:

- the planning section, which includes
 - ♦ the environmental quality and SWM office,
 - ♦ the environmental education and civil society participation office,
 - ♦ the communication office,
 - ♦ the natural resources and environmental conservation office,
 - ♦ the GIS office and
 - ♦ the accounts office; and
- the operations section, which includes
 - ♦ the workforce coordination office, and
 - ♦ the regional managers, supervisors and the sweepers, waste collectors and other employees, totalling 392 staff.

Canelones provides some services with its own workforce (waste management in small towns, and disposal sites), provides others through the private sector (waste management in the main cities), and partners with NGOs for recycling programmes and street sweeping.

The Environmental Quality and SWM Office has two professionals (an agronomist specialized in composting and a social anthropologist specialized in recycling programmes with waste pickers and in SWM), and an engineering student as an intern. The communication office and environmental education office are independent of the SWM office yet closely linked to SWM because the main tasks of these offices concern education and awareness relating to waste management.

This case study was written after interviewing the General Manager and some employees from the operations and professional staff. There are also my personal observations since I am one of these local government staff. The present paper does not necessarily reflect the official opinion of Canelones Government Administration.

2. Recruitment of new staff, career structure, resignations and transfers

The current government has recruited young professionals to work in both national and local government administrations. In the last three years in Canelones, this recruitment has brought young professionals with skills and knowledge needed for the various issues within municipal management, to compensate for the lack of experience of the many municipal employees who had previously been assigned to the government administration in exchange for political favours. The Department of Environmental Management recruited 10 young professionals and university students (interns). This intake has resulted in better planning and management.

However, despite the fact that nowadays young professionals have a better chance of getting a job directly related to their studies, salaries remain low. A common way to increase the professional staff is the system of internships. The advanced university students who are taken on as interns find themselves with a chance to gain valuable work experience. These engagements are arranged by means of agreements between Government Administrations and the National University. While this is a good way for students to have their first work experience and so give them direction and professional contacts that will help them in their careers, the big drawback is that interns are paid very little. The salaries of professionals in local government are not sufficiently attractive. However, usually the young professionals stay in these low-paid jobs because of the shortage of alternative job opportunities in our country, especially in disciplines such as biology, social sciences, and communication.

Higher education in our country is practically centralized in the national capital. Most of the people who move to the capital to undertake higher study do not return to their home towns when they graduate. Half the population of the country is concentrated in the capital. It is difficult to hire qualified staff in the interior of the country because the local human resources are scarce. Canelones is an hour's drive from the capital, and the majority of the professional staff working there live in the capital and travel daily to and from their workplace. This daily commuting means lost time and money – interns spend 23% of their salaries on transport and 10% on food eaten during working hours.

There are two types of government staff: most of the professional staff are *recruited staff* with annual contracts, and most of the operations and administrative staff are career staff or *budgeted staff*. Most of the budgeted staff were recruited in the past as political favours and many of them are not trained and have no knowledge about municipal management. There is a national law that does not allow budgeted governments officials to be dismissed except under serious circumstances. As a consequence there are large numbers of officials who have a culture of working as little as possible and are not able to achieve the required degree of efficiency. There is a joke relating to the habit in Uruguay of eating gnocchi (Italian pasta) on the 29th of every month which reflecting a common impression of the work ethic of government staff: government officials are frequently called “gnocchi” because they go to their offices only on the 29th of the month when their salaries are paid.

Vacancies are announced in the National Official Press and on the web, but the most efficient way of finding employees to fill vacancies involves mailings between professional networks and organizations. The selection of new employees is based on training and experience and the best qualified are called for a job interview.

Because of the small number of positions in the organization structure there are no opportunities of promotion for professional staff. Operations staff have been relocated, promoting them and building upon the skills that each one has. This was a good opportunity to develop the skills of those officials with the potential for certain tasks. Currently, for example, there are two successful regional operations managers without higher qualifications – one who used to be a driver and the other a waste collector.

Usually, the General Manager (a decision-maker and political appointee), arranges transfers with General Operations Manager and the regional managers, with the aim of improving regional management. The desired objective may be achieved, but these changes slow down

improvements in management because the new managers have to get abreast of new locations and new situations .

The managerial staff consider SWM an important field to work in because they understand that is one of the main issues that needs to be improved. The operations staff, too, regard SWM as an interesting field to work in because employees have been comfortable working in this Department since the management changed from a policy of repression to a policy of environmental education. In the past, it was common to punish an employee for committing an error in his work, even though (s)he had never been properly trained. Now, when an employee makes a mistake, the manager explains her/him how to improve her/his performance and gives her/him another chance.

3. Range of duties

Although the Department of Environmental Management is in charge of a range of environmental issues, the main political objective is to improve SWM. As a result, SWM is the only responsibility for many of the staff.

The professional staff and managers are often involved in raising public awareness, although there is a special team for environmental education for SWM. They are often involved in workshops with neighbours and local elected officials, at which SWM services are evaluated, different views are heard and joint actions are planned. In addition the environmental education staff usually organize public activities and local campaigns to improve awareness and the sharing of responsibility in relation to SWM. There is also a communications expert who is responsible for organizing neighbourhood workshops and informing the public about activities in the area.

The persons responsible for planning SWM are members of the professional staff of the Environmental Quality and Waste Management Office, in accordance with government policies and strategies. After being approved by the General Manager, the operations plan is developed by the operation managers and implemented by the operations staff.

Usually plans for SWM cannot be achieved properly on the ground because of the lack of municipal resources, and this fact is clear to the public. For example, to achieve a recycling programme which involved formalizing 35 waste pickers, it was necessary to persuade many industries to stop selling the recyclable waste that they generated and instead donate it to this programme of social inclusion. Many of the companies that were invited to participate were not interested to join the programme because they did not trust that we were able to collect the waste in a timely manner, because of their previous experience of the lack of municipal capacities. We had to compete with recycling companies that used to buy industrial waste and always collect it on time. These situations in which plans are not implemented because of the operational difficulties are very common.

A plan for environmental education suffered six substantial changes in a year because of problems with available material resources and staff. That ambitious plan consisted of two days of training workshops for teachers, cleanup campaigns, tree planting in six public spaces, neighbourhood planning sessions, and large public events (awareness parades with children the 5th of June, international environment day). The actual achievement was two days of cleaning and the two public events. The rest of the plan is still pending because of

delays in financing. Many clean-up days were planned, even with the neighbourhoods, and then were put on hold because of delays in getting posters that were going to be placed around the cleaned area.

4. Qualifications and formal training

The qualifications that are required for vacancies in SWM are not strict because in Uruguay there are almost no staff trained specifically for this field. There is no formal education in SWM. At the National University there are about ten engineers and chemists who were trained in SWM in other countries or who have some field experience, and who teach subjects related to SWM.

In addition, many young professionals are currently emigrating, and this is another reason why there are few staff who are qualified in SWM. So, for example, of the staff working in SWM in Canelones, only one has specific training in SWM, and this knowledge was acquired by attending courses and conferences and from experience gained in previous jobs. Of the other professional staff working in SWM, one is an agronomist who attended a course in composting, and the other is a student of sanitary engineering with no training in SWM.

With regard to the environmental education staff, neither of the two teachers nor the sociology student had specific training in environmental education or SWM, so when they were hired they had in-service training, being introduced to the topic by the best trained professional employee.

It is necessary to have some kind of formal training in SWM, particularly for local government officials. And this training should be geographically decentralized, to allow remote townships have access to it. This year I participated in a course on the management of hazardous waste, taught by a specialist of the Environmental Ministry, conducted once a week for three months. This training course was for national and local government officials who work in SWM. There were four participants from Canelones, one from Montevideo (the national capital) and two from the county of Florida – only three of the 19 counties were represented. These absences were because there were no financial resources for the accommodation of the officials who wanted to come from far away. Another reason was the fact that many government administrations were not interested in the course, or because attendance depended on the combined willingness of both the director and the staff member, or on the willingness to manage without the staff member when (s)he was attending the course. Even though Canelones wished its officials to attend the course, the participants had to miss several classes because of the needs of regular work. There were not enough staff to enable some of them to leave their duties at work, once a week for three months.

5. In-service and on-the-job training

5.1 Resources for in-service training

Canelones government administration does not have a strategy for capacity development. No time is allowed for training courses and there are no opportunities for taking courses in SWM in Uruguay.

Instead, training is given on-the-job, with short lectures or discussions while the work is being performed, and suggestions offered by specialized staff to the others. The person responsible for in-service training has the skills and knowledge but not the time to devote to this duty. Also, the staff who are to be trained, do not have enough time and in some cases the willingness to improve their ways of working.

With some exceptions, there is no formal initial training when an employee starts to work, because of a lack of staff for this purpose.

5.2 Available training opportunities

Training courses given by the Local Government Administration (strategic planning, management of human resources and administrative courses) have a positive impact because they provide an opportunity, in some cases, for ideas suggested by students to be put into practice. In some cases, if a course is of interest to the local government administration, it is publicised in the department. These courses are taught by teachers of the National University in the fields of sociology, political science, economics, administration, etc. There is also a training course for the administration staff and soon there will be a training course for operations foremen. But, as was mentioned, there is almost no training course in SWM.

5.3 Selection

The opportunities for developing the skills and knowledge of staff have come through the allocation of tasks that are directly related to the knowledge that each staff member has. As an example, in my situation, although I had experience in SWM but not in environmental education, I was hired to work in education. After a year, I was transfer to the SWM office because of my experience in this issue, giving me the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge that I already had.

The selection of employees for attending the few training courses is decided directly by the General Manager according to the needs for skills and knowledge development and the probability of the trainee staying in the administration. For example, the interns who have no intention of staying for a long period are excluded from attending these courses. Usually the employees are happy to attend courses, because they welcome the opportunity of developing their capacity.

5.4 Training for operations staff

One reason that plans cannot be implemented adequately is that the principal stakeholders in SWM, the operations staff, are not always aware of the importance of their work. They obey the orders of their supervisors, but they are not aware of the wider plan that is being carried out. The operations staff, having little understanding and motivation, think that their role is simply to clean the streets and collect bags of waste. They have no knowledge about sanitary disposal, the impacts of poor management of waste, the importance of recycling and so on. It is necessary to provide training in SWM for operations staff (including foremen) and find ways of getting their interest in their work and enhancing their expertise. The operations staff are the ones who have little knowledge about SWM and because of their frequent contact with the public it is necessary to improve their knowledge about SWM and the strategies and plans of the county.

Since collection and sweeping workers are the ones who have direct and frequent contact with the general public, and hear their complaints and recommendations, I have suggested several times to the General Manager that the labourers should be informed about SWM and the plans for providing services so that they can act as environmental promoters. The General Manager agrees with the importance of this suggestion, but then emergencies delay any implementation.

Up to the time of writing, it has only been possible to talk in this way to three staff members who are in charge of the collection waste for one of the recycling programmes. When this programme started, instead of directing them participate in it without any explanations regarding the objectives, as was usually the case, we decided to tell them about the importance of this programme for the waste pickers who were involved in it, and about the importance of their role in public awareness. Simply as a result of this talk, they started to improve their performance, showing a greater willingness to make the programme work. This change of perception – seeing themselves now as environmental promoters – increased their commitment to their work. Now they often make suggestions about how improve the programme, based on their experience, and this has been very useful in improving the public image of the programme.

5.5 Constraints

In my opinion, because the frequent and unpredictable emergency situations give no opportunity for training courses, the best training is what can be done on-the-job, by means of short talks and daily tips.

An example of how is difficult to develop capacity in everyday practice is the fact that for one year some places have been available on a training course in ISO 14.000 Environmental Management Service, but no managerial employee has had enough time to participate.

Sometimes the lack of interest in attending training courses is caused by the fact that it is not always possible to apply in practice the knowledge that was gained, because of the permanent emergency situation that has already been mentioned.

5.6 Sharing between professionals

The main difficulty of disseminating information related to SWM is the reluctance of some professional staff to share information that they have. There are so few professional opportunities in this field that most professionals have a competitive attitude and are afraid that other professionals might make them lose a promotion. When a professional employee quits or is fired, it is normal that (s)he does not leave any information related to the work that (s)he has done during the time spent in the government administration (including information about surveys, municipal plans, or a record about activities conducted in the past). This means that when a new employee replaces another, (s)he has to spend a considerable amount of time collecting information about the work that was done previously. When I was recruited for the environmental education office, the official that was before me deleted all the information about the environmental education plan that had already been developed, details of the social organizations that existed in the county, and other information related to the local government management that existed previously. So I had to spend the first month investigating, interviewing other officials and the General Manager – taking up their time – to

collect all this information once more. This also happened to other professional staff when they were recruited for other areas.

There have been some cases in which skills and knowledge are enhanced by hiring temporary staff for specific purposes. For example, as I write we are recruiting temporary professional staff to provide advice in sanitary landfill construction.

6. Other means of improving skills, knowledge and understanding

The Department of Environmental Management has more computers per person than other departments. However, Internet access is restricted because in the past most of the officials used it for personal purposes, neglecting their work. Only professional staff and managers have access to the Internet. In addition a web filter was installed to control the web pages visited. This filter creates some inconvenience because it unintentionally prevents access to web pages that are linked to SWM. Gaining access to such restricted web pages involves a lengthy bureaucratic process.

There are few publications on SWM in Uruguay. There are some foreign printed materials that have been obtained in international meetings or when foreign expert delegations visit the county.

Most professional officials usually take their own printed material to the workplace. Those who have their own books in the workplace are usually willing to share them with their peers. But often there is not enough time to devote to reading these publications, unless it is really necessary. The only solution is to spend leisure time (weekends, evenings.) reading this material.

There are just a few national or local conferences relating to SWM and if an employee wants to attend one of these meetings, the possibility of attending it depends strictly on the relevance to current work responsibilities.

7. Management style

Meetings are held periodically between the General Manager, the operations managers and professional staff. These meetings are used to get an overview of the state of SWM and to share planning ideas. Often there are confrontations between the General Manager and professional staff on the one hand and the operations managers on the other, resulting from the different ways of seeing the situation. The first group wants to make a proper plan for SWM, and the operations managers are pessimistic about whether a useful plan can be developed, because of the lack of municipal resources and the operational difficulties they see every day. In the end, the General Manager always finds an ingenious way of achieving an adequate resolution, but then problems reappear. This is our daily situation.

The General Manager has the characteristic of calling each planned action the priority, as a way to encourage progress. The problems begin when, for example, of the ten planned actions, eight are said to be priorities. So it is necessary to determine which of these eight actions must be done urgently, and so on. Usually the Director listens to suggestions, and

sometimes implements these suggestions, but as a decision-maker by political appointment he always has the last word.

The management style is as follows: At the top is the Mayor (elected) followed by the General Manager. Plans are developed on the basis of their decisions. Below them are the professional staff with the operations coordinator and the regional managers. Below them are the foremen who are in charge of the rest of the operations staff.

The professional staff and operations managers are on the same level on the organisation chart. They have to manage the interface between theoretical planning and operational reality. However, some operations managers feel that they are under the professionals because they see them as "more intelligent and wise" because of having a university degree. This is particularly true with those managers that used to work in waste collection.

It is intended that everyday matters are resolved by regional managers or professional staff, but sometimes the General Manager has trouble delegating responsibilities, wanting to have his eye on everything.

The General Manager often goes into the field to review operations, getting involved in every operational detail and trying to solve any difficulty. He is always monitoring the standard of operations, both of the municipal staff and of the private company that is involved in waste collection.

8. Conclusion

Summarizing, this case study shows that even if there is an intention to improve the capacity of the municipal staff, it is still difficult to put this into practice because of the lack of time and because of the emergencies that this local government administration continues to face as a result of the limited resources. An example of improvement in capacity made without requiring any expenditure are the informal talks and phone calls between the programme planner and the operatives in charge of the collection of recyclable industrial waste. This simple means helped these operations employees to improve their methods of working so that they could achieve the targets of this recycling programme.

A challenge that must be faced up to in this case study is the situation of hundreds of operations and administrative budgeted staff working in SWM. The inefficiency of these employees causes complications for the management, either by delaying the completion of the work or through the bureaucratic formalities introduced into the administration. It is necessary to change their ways of working, perhaps by helping them to understand the importance of their work to the achievement of a breakthrough in SWM. Developing their capacities and promoting their participation by involving them in SWM issues – for example asking for their opinions about how to improve the management, based on their experience – could be a good way of bringing about a change in their work patterns. Some improvements were observed after this approach was used in a training course for administrative staff.